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ALL FOR HERSELF.

VOL. III.

ALL FOR HERSELF.

BY

SHIRLEY SMITH.

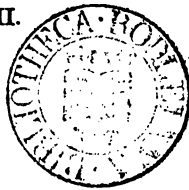
"Cosi fan tutte."

"In law what plea so tainted and corrupt
But, being seasoned with a gracious voice,
Obscures the show of evil."

Merchant of Venice.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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ALL FOR HERSELF.

CHAPTER I.

MRS. WESTBROOK started for Manchester an hour or two after Saville's letter had reached her, and she arrived late in the afternoon. She went at once to the hotel from which he had addressed his brief note ; but on inquiring for him, she found that he was out.

The windows of the sitting-room she engaged for herself overlooked the street, and she sat watching to see him come in until evening fell. At last she saw him,

and her heart beat so painfully at the thought of the coming interview that she had to brace herself up for it by a strong stimulant. It was the first time she had ever had recourse to such a dangerous expedient.

But still she had to wait. It would not answer her purpose to come in upon him while a smart waiter was carrying in his dinner. She little knew that the poor fellow went down drearily to the coffee-room and made a pretence of eating at the *table-d'hôte*.

At eight o'clock she rang her bell, and desired a waiter to tell Mr. Saville that a friend was waiting to see him in No. — ; ever mindful of appearances she would not let herself be seen going to visit him.

Her bedroom opened off the sitting-room, and going into it she kept the door slightly ajar and waited for him to come. She wanted to meet him quite alone.

He came in listlessly, and just glanced round the room. The "friend" whom he expected to see was Lady Olivia Forrester, for he had telegraphed to her the news of Leda Fortescue's death. He did not think that Mrs. Westbrook would have been bold and mad enough to follow him; and when, as the waiter went out, he heard a rustle of silk, and saw a woman kneeling at his feet, he did not for a moment recognise her. But when she spoke he recoiled from her with such evident repugnance that her courage almost failed.

"You do not mean what you wrote," she said piteously. "Oh! Edward, pity me! forgive me!"

Whether by accident or design he never, of course, knew, but her beautiful long hair fell down over her shoulders, and never, even when decked out in her costliest dress, had she looked more lovely.

But Saville's eyes were opened, and her power over him was gone.

"I am sorry you thought it necessary to come here, Mrs. Westbrook," he said, holding out his hand with frigid politeness to raise her from her theatrical position. "It would have been far better and wiser for you to have gone your way, and to have allowed me to go mine, without having brought about another meeting. I wish to avoid you; you do not know the pain it gives me to see you."

"What have I done, Edward, that you cast me off without a word?"

"You know only too well," he answered. "You played upon the too credulous and too unselfish nature of a girl who was mere wax in your experienced hands; you have been neither womanly nor truthful, and yet you think, that because you are so beautiful a man must be tempted to forgive——"

"She never loved you as I did!" Mrs. Westbrook interrupted, with passionate vehemence. "Do you think anyone could have induced me to give you up? I do not defend myself, but you ought not to be so hard upon me when you remember that if I sinned it was for you."

"And killed her as surely as if you had put a bullet through her heart! Yes, she is dead," he continued, in answer to the question he read in her eyes, "and you and I part to-night for ever."

"And have I, then, been nothing to you all these weeks, Edward?" she asked, getting up from the chair in which he had placed her, and crossing the room to his side. She had loosely twisted up her hair, and her beautiful face looked wan and haggard in the gaslight. "Did you not love me a little? You do not give me up without some regret?"

"Why do you torture yourself with such

questions?" he answered. He was too noble and too manly to wound her as he might have done. "I am not more stoical than other men, and I do not say that your grace and beauty have not had some power over me, but love!—no, I care more for that poor girl who is lying cold in her coffin than I ever cared for you. Are you satisfied now? Remember you forced me to speak."

"But if all this had not happened—if you had not met her again, you would have married me and been happy?"

"Married you, yes; but happy I have never been since she left me four months ago, and I do not think you could have made me so. Why should I hide the fact from you now that, as each hour brought our wedding-day nearer, I grew more miserable. You have spoiled my life—why should I spare you?" His sense of misery had grown upon him with terrible

acuteness as he answered her last question, and his forbearance vanished in a moment.

"You have not done so," she said bitterly, "and I have humbled myself in vain. Oh! how I wish that I had never seen you!"

"You cannot wish it more heartily than I do," he replied. "When I think of how you must have plotted and planned to come between me and my darling, and then look at you standing there full of life and vigour, while she died in my arms with broken limbs and racked with pain, I feel as if I could kill you!"

"Then it is all over!" she cried out at last, convinced that there was no hope of forgiveness, "and I shall never, never see you again!" Then, before he could draw back, she had flung her arms about his neck and kissed him wildly. But in an instant she recovered herself, and with all the dignity habitual to her, she drew away

from him. "You have my best wishes for your happiness," she said, without a quiver in her voice. "Good-bye."

"I thank you for them, but they come too late," he answered bitterly; and then, without looking at her again, he left the room.

The next day he was chief mourner at Leda's funeral, and while he was standing alone at her grave, Mrs. Westbrook was flying back to town by express train. Saville scarcely allowed his thoughts to rest upon her at all; it seemed to him so unjust that she should escape punishment for the cruel duplicity she had practised upon Leda, and he was angry with himself for having been deceived by her. He was mortified, too, to remember that he had ever held her in his arms, and kissed her, forgetful, for the moment, of everything but her wonderful beauty; and he did not realise that to have lost him, and to have

been obliged to listen to the bitter and cutting words he had spoken, was about the most severe punishment he could have inflicted. He had sent her back to town smarting with wounded pride, and writhing under the keenest disappointment and humiliation she had ever known.

But once satisfied that all was at an end between her and Saville, Mrs. Westbrook set herself, with her usual fortitude, to hide the wound she had received. She had humbled herself to the very dust before him, but she was determined to defy the world to say that she felt one iota of regret for having lost him.

Luckily for her, the fact that she was about to marry Saville had never been publicly announced. Of course it was known to a few of her intimate friends and acquaintances, but it would be very easy to persuade them that she had changed her mind at the eleventh hour. So she

simply wrote to her own people to tell them that the affair was broken off, and then she began at once to make preparations for the reception of a large party of guests at Ranmore Lodge.

“He shall hear of my marriage before the year is out,” she said, as she wrote her invitation to Percival, taking care to tell him at the same time that she had changed her mind, and giving him to understand plainly enough that the prize he had so often tried for was now willing to be won.

But, by some strange fatality, the letter never reached him. Mrs. Westbrook wrote all her invitations at the same time, and being hurried to save the post at the end, it so happened that the one addressed to Percival slipped in amongst the loose sheets of note-paper, was put away into the drawer of her writing-table, and overlooked. Some weeks later she found it, and many a time during the rest of her

life she thought what a change it might have made in her fate if he had received it.

Prince Michael Petöfi had not left England, and he was but too happy to accept Mrs. Westbrook's gracious invitation to join her shooting-party at Ranmore Lodge; but when no reply came from Percival she was both piqued and puzzled.

"I could tolerate him as my husband now," she thought, "but if he chooses to be sulky, he must take the consequences. I am not going to ask him a second time."

The fact that Mrs. Westbrook was "entertaining a large circle of friends, amongst whom were Prince Michael Petöfi, etc., etc., at her beautiful place in Surrey" was duly chronicled in the *Morning Post*, and Saville read the paragraph with no small surprise. It will be remembered that he did not even know of the existence of the beautiful

place in Surrey, and, of course, he never guessed that it had been bought and fitted up with the view of giving him pleasure.

The original party, with a few additions from time to time, remained at Ranmore for nearly a fortnight. Every day Mrs. Westbrook looked out for Percival, thinking, perhaps, that her letter had had to follow him about, and that he would answer it in person, and every day Prince Michael grew more marked in his attentions, and she knew that before he left, the offer would be made by which—if she made up her mind to accept it—the whole of her future life would be influenced.

“Can I do it?” she thought over and over again. “Can I do it?”

He appeared to be desperately in love, but his fierce-looking eyes dismayed her as they had done when she had first known him, and the fear that perhaps, after all,

he was attracted by her money, made her reception of his courtship not uniformly gracious. But he never lost hope, and although she was conscious of a feeling very like abhorrence for him, she felt such a wild longing for a total change in her life that she knew well enough what her answer was likely to be when his proposal came.

She craved for change and variety, and marriage with the prince would at once gratify her desires. It would be impossible for him to live in England, for he had a post about the Court of the Emperor in Vienna. He had given Mrs. Westbrook a glowing account of his magnificent palace, or *hôtel*, in the capital, and also of his *château* near Pesth. The latter was, in reality, situated in a wild and isolated spot, and it was inhabited by the prince only when he went to hunt and shoot upon his estate ; but Cecilia pictured to herself

what it would be when she had introduced English comforts, and, perhaps, managed to get over a few English guests.

These were her ideas when she went over in her mind what the inducements were for marriage with a man whom she scarcely liked even as an acquaintance. All hope of marrying for love was at an end, and Percival, who would have suited her far better than the prince, had treated her last overtures with silent contempt.

Prince Michael thought what a sensation his beautiful English wife would create in Vienna, and how quickly and pleasantly her money would relieve him from the embarrassments into which gambling and dissipation had plunged him. His ideas upon the subject of English property and investments were remarkably clear; he knew exactly the sources from which Mrs.

Westbrook's wealth was derived—how much was invested in foreign securities, and how much came from mines, and household property; and he longed hungrily for the time when it would be in his power to aid in the spending of the really splendid income.

He had almost given up all hope of winning her, for a rumour of her approaching marriage had got about when her invitation reached him. The fact of having been asked to join a party in her own house was encouragement in itself, and he determined that this time she should not escape him.

But until she finally gave up all hope of seeing Percival, it was astonishing the cleverness with which she kept him at arm's-length; then, suddenly, her tactics changed, and she let him see that he need not fear rejection. He was not slow to

take the hint, and when the party at Ranmore broke up, she had promised to be his wife:

CHAPTER II.

WHEN all her guests had left, and the excitement was over, Mrs. Westbrook felt, for the first time in her life, miserably alone and friendless. The great silent rooms were oppressive to her; she could not escape from herself, and from the dreary thoughts that crowded upon her.

She was not given to retrospection, but, do what she would on that her first solitary evening in the country house, over which she had hoped at that time to be presiding as Edward Saville's wife, she could not help thinking about her past life. She was only six-and-twenty; she was one of

the loveliest, richest, and most popular women of her day, and yet she felt that evening as if one hour of real and innocent happiness would have been cheaply purchased by the sacrifice of both wealth and beauty.

“What have they done for me?” she thought. “Neither the one nor the other enabled me to win the only love I ever coveted, and when I schemed to win it, fate was against me, and I earned his contempt.”

She never traced her failures to anything except the influence of a malignant fate. The discovery of the diamond ring had forced her into submitting either to the disgrace of exposure, or to the alternative of marrying her cousin Edgar, whom she most heartily disliked and despised! Well, at least Fate had been kind to her in taking him; for had he lived, her life would have

been miserable to contemplate, from her point of view.

She did not often feel remorse on account of her treatment of the unhappy youth, whom she had silenced first by a pretence of love, and then by marriage; but that lonely evening, when the autumn wind went sighing round the large, empty, silent house, his face seemed to rise up before her as she had seen it on his death-bed, and she shuddered, half expecting that he would appear at her side.

She sat down to the piano, and tried to scare away with music the ghosts that haunted her; but neither voice nor hands seemed under her control, and, moreover, the days of her first acquaintance with Saville were recalled but too vividly, and all her disappointment and humiliation swept back upon her again.

“ Another evening like this, and I should

go mad," she thought, as she at last went to her rooms upstairs, and found refuge in the companionship of her maid. She was not given to make a confidant of the silent, but not unobservant, English girl, who had been in her service since she had become a woman of fashion ; but this evening she relaxed her rule, and told the attentive damsel that a great change was about to take place, as her mistress was going to marry Prince Michael Petöfi.

The event seemed less unlikely to take place when she had told some one about it. It would have been less easy, she thought, for Saville to have broken off the marriage, if it had been talked of more publicly.

But there was not the slightest fear that Prince Michael would let go the rich prize he had waited for so patiently. Mrs. Westbrook, not caring to spend another lonely evening at Ranmore Lodge, went

back to town, and before the end of the week she found her approaching marriage not only announced in all the fashionable papers, but talked of everywhere, letters of congratulation arrived by every post, a perfect avalanche of cards descended upon her from the Austrian Embassy, and she found herself hurried along towards the brilliant alliance that was awaiting her, in a state of feverish and breathless excitement, which left her but little time for thought.

The question of settlements was not raised. The Prince was supposed to be very rich, and certainly the costly presents which he lavished upon his future wife were evidence in favour, not only of his wealth, but of his generosity. Mrs. Westbrook's money was her own absolutely. She could leave it to whom she pleased, and in spite of the advice of her lawyer, who thought the idea the very maddest he

had ever heard, she announced that, as soon as the wedding was over, she intended to make a will in her husband's favour.

In the meantime she made over to him, as a wedding present, her beautiful estate of Ranmore, which, with its costly furniture, was worth at least forty thousand pounds.

"You make the presents worthy of a princess," he had said in his foreign English, kissing her hand gallantly when she gave him the deed of gift. "But it is the truth that you give me the thing most valuable when you have given yourself."

He was all deference and devotion in those days preceding the marriage, and Mrs. Westbrook told herself over and over again that it was better to marry for rank than for love. She was not obliged to make any effort to please the Prince—he was but too ready to declare that whatever she said and did was perfection, and to

humour all her whims and fancies, and the contrast between his demonstrative love-making and Saville's calm coldness during his engagement, was painfully and oppressively vivid.

But the adulation satisfied her ambitious soul, and there were moments when she actually congratulated herself that the marriage with the young Englishman had been broken off.

The wedding was a superb ceremonial. The court of Austria was represented by an archduke and his wife, and the Emperor and Empress sent a costly present from Vienna to the bride; an English duke and duchess insisted that the future Princess should be married from their stately mansion in — Street; and more than one country house was put at the disposal of the "happy pair" for the honeymoon, but the Prince wished to go at once to Paris, *en route* for Vienna.

A cardinal and two bishops performed the first ceremony in the private chapel of the Austrian Embassy, and the rite of the Church of England was solemnized with full choral service in Westminster Abbey. Never were a husband and wife bound together with so much pomp and ceremony!

Mrs. Westbrook, in her dress of lavender silk, with a train of costly velvet of the same colour, trimmed with point lace, looked more beautiful than ever. Although a widow, she would not wear a bonnet, but her rich hair was adorned by flowers, and her only jewels were diamond earrings and stars—worth a king's ransom—to fasten the rich lace veil that covered her from head to foot. The diamonds were the gift of the bridegroom, and they were paid for some time after her marriage out of her own money!

Her presents were magnificent—the

Queen sent her a Cashmere shawl, and His or Her R. H. was attached to many a pretty and valuable gift upon the table where the costly offerings were exhibited.

Lord Forrester was not at the wedding, but his beautiful wife, with her father and mother, represented the relatives on the side of the bride. Helen's friends noticed that she was looking very sad, and they condoled with her upon the absence of her husband. It was not very clear to anyone where he was—some said he had gone to India, others to Africa, others again that he had joined an Arctic Expedition, but all were agreed that his poor young wife was breaking her heart about him.

At last the tedious ceremonial and the wedding breakfast were over, and Prince and Princess Michael Petöfi took leave of their friends and started for Dover. The first halt was at the Lord Warden, the next at Paris, and on the way the Princess was

gratified by the universal homage that was paid to her rank and beauty.

"This is life," she said to herself over and over again, as the well-trained servants of the Prince bowed low before her, and called her "Your Excellency." "What a fool I was to think that love alone could have made me happy!"

She had not a particle of affection for her husband, and as she had not any respect for size or sinew in a man, his tall, athletic figure did not claim her admiration. Brute strength was the only thing she stood in awe of, and she sometimes looked at him with fear in her heart, as she thought of what might happen when those serene days of the honeymoon had passed away.

Prince Michael was not intellectual. He had, for his size, a small head, without indications of brain power visible in its formation, and his conversation was precise-

ly what a judge of character would have expected to hear from his coarse-looking but well-formed lips.

Music seemed to be his one refined taste, so on that point he and his bride had something in common; but on that alone. And she sometimes shuddered as she thought what her life would be if she were not allowed to find a sympathetic male friend in the society of the new world she was about to enter. The Prince had been jealous as a lover, and if he proved to be equally so as a husband there would be little hope of inducing him to look leniently upon friendship even when conducted upon the most strictly Platonic basis, and she could not hide from herself that as a general rule men seemed to find Platonism, like many another virtue, very hard to practise. She had a presentiment that such pleasant little pastimes as innocent flirtation would be closed to her in her exalted position as

Princess of a noble Hungarian house ; but she lived in hopes that her husband would grow careless after a time, and allow her the liberty in which her soul delighted.

With such a desire in her mind it will easily be believed that she soon saw, without the pang which such a discovery would have given to almost every newly-made wife, that the Prince, although still, to all appearance, her devoted slave, was by no means insensible to the charms of other women. It seemed all the same to him whether the beauties who caught his wandering fancy were of gentle or of humble birth, and Cecilia could not ignore the humiliating fact that even during the first months of her marriage he was by no means faithful to her.

On the score of actual kindness at that time she had not anything to complain of, but she very soon found out that her will was no longer law. She never knew

exactly how it happened that she was obliged to give way to him in many things against which she inly rebelled. But so it was, the real truth being that his size and strength frightened her. She was courageous enough when she was physically and mentally the superior, but had poor, gentle Edgar Westbrook been a man of strong will and powerful frame, the plot by which she had deceived him might have entered her head, but she would not have had the courage to carry it out.

A few days after her marriage she formally signed, in the presence of witnesses, a will which had been drawn out by her own lawyer in London, and by which, if he survived her, her husband became possessed of her large fortune. It was in a matter of that kind that Mrs. Westbrook's usually clear common-sense invariably deserted her. She liked to do things that looked noble, trustful, disin-

terested. It was delightful to her to have the power to bestow her wealth upon the man she had married, and to feel conscious that the world, *her* world, would alternately praise her generosity and blame her folly, but at the same time she most ardently hoped that the Prince would not outlive her.

When her lawyer remonstrated with her in private, she had been frank enough with him.

"My dear friend," she had answered, "the Prince is fifteen or twenty years older than I am, and he has lived rather a fast life. I feel certain that I shall outlive him; and if I should die soon and suddenly, without children, why, then, let him have the money."

The lawyer listened, quite unconvinced, but the will was prepared, duly signed by the Princess, and witnessed, and if she had

done a foolish thing, she had at least the satisfaction that it was in her power to undo it at any moment.

CHAPTER III.

THE newly-married pair spent the winter in Vienna, in a whirl of gaiety and amusement, that left the Princess but little time for the exercise of memory or regret. In the spring they came to England, to spend the season in London. They arrived quite early, in order that the Prince might be in time for all the great race meetings of the year.

Even if the house formerly occupied by Mrs. Westbrook in Rutland Gate had not been let, it would have been much too small for the household over which she now presided, so a large furnished mansion was taken in Grosvenor Street, and then, for

the first time, she felt as if the object of her life had been fully attained. She was "the fashion," her visiting list was not only a long one, but it was filled with distinguished names ; her engagements multiplied hour by hour, and the beautiful Princess Petöfi gave her name to flowers, dresses, and bonnets. There was a new rose—the Petöfi—exhibited at all the shows ; and Worth sent out into the world the "Cecilia polonaise ;" her photograph was "on sale," as though she had been an operatic or theatrical celebrity ; and no fashionable assemblies were considered perfect if she had not honoured them with her presence.

At last she had gained the height of her ambition, the moment for which she had longed had come. She had not only wealth and beauty, but an assured position. She was sought after, admired, and fêted to her heart's content.

And yet, in spite of it all, there were moments when the remembrance of her last interview with Saville came across her, and made her miserable in the midst of her triumphs. The thought that he knew her for what she was, embittered her whole life. She felt as if the position she had attained were not secure when even one person in the world knew that she was false; but still she was not afraid that Saville would betray her.

Happy in the highest and best sense of the term, she was not; but then hers was not a nature to pine for the happiness which pure, untainted hearts can find in innocent pleasures. She would probably have echoed the remark of the wicked French marquise, and declared that she "hated innocent pleasures!"

It was just possible that, had she married Saville, she would have grown weary

of trying to gratify and please him. She had tried to win him chiefly because he had been hard to conquer, and because defeat was mortifying to her vanity, and also because she had felt for him what she called love ; but in her secret heart she knew that to be a leader of fashion as Princess Petöfi, gave her more of the kind of happiness that suited her than the comparatively obscure life she must have led as Mrs. Saville would have done.

If she could have met him after her marriage, and have had him hovering about in the pleasant position of half friend, half lover, there would not, she thought, have been anything left to wish for. To feel that it was in her power at any moment to risk position and reputation at his bidding, would have given her life the zest which it lacked, in spite of her brilliant social success ; for she longed

to play with fire even more dangerous and destructive than any she had yet encountered.

It is a very common thing for imaginative people to live two distinct lives—an inner and an outer life—and the Princess Petöfi was no exception to the rule. She often spent hours holding imaginary conversations with Saville. In those fancy scenes he was always repentant and at her feet, and she was gradually yielding to the temptation of loving him, not wisely, but too well.

There is not anything more easy than to say that the above is an exaggerated picture of a woman's mind—that is, the mind of a woman without principle, whose moral nature had early been warped by pernicious teaching, and who had set the gratification of self above all earthly good. She seemed inclined always to guide her conduct by the principle of recompense or compensa-

tion from herself to herself. Her plan of a future to be spent with Saville had no doubt involved some self-sacrifice on her part, for he had not anything to offer as an equivalent for the ambitious dreams she was willing to renounce for his sake; but, having lost him, she acted as though she ought to give herself some reward for the disappointment she had endured.

It was not enough that she was what she had often longed to be—"the fashion," or that she had made a brilliant marriage; she longed to have some pleasure, to drink of some stolen waters, concerning which the world in general, and her husband in particular, were to be kept in profound ignorance.

But very much to her surprise, and, it may be said, to her disappointment also, she had not any temptation to resist during the first weeks of her visit to England. She had fully expected to have seen de-

spairing lovers at her feet, whom she might have admonished to "struggle with their feelings for her sake." But whether the Madame Petöfi was less attractive than Mrs. Westbrook had been, or whether the more enterprising admirers were warned off by the size and strength of Prince Michael, and by the rumours of his ferocious temper when roused, certain it is that no efforts were made to shake the allegiance of his beautiful wife.

About a fortnight before the Derby Day, and when the Prince and Princess had been about a month in town, Percival appeared upon the scene. The husband and wife were riding together in the park, when he came up and greeted Cecilia as if they had parted but the day before.

It will be remembered that he had not seen her since about a week before his interview with Lady Forrester in the deserted garden at Beauwood Chase, and he was of

course quite unaware of the invitation to visit Mrs. Westbrook at Ranmore Lodge which had been mislaid.

On clearing out the contents of her writing-table before her marriage, when the Rutland Gate house was about to be let, Cecilia had come upon the letter to Percival, and his silence was at once explained. She did not write to him, but she kept the letter by her, in the hope of being able to show it to him some day.

The remembrance of it, and of all it had been meant to convey to the man who had been the most pertinacious of her admirers in the happy days when she had been free to choose, gave an unusual softness and shyness to her manner when she spoke to him. He was, as it were, the last link left to her between the old life and the new, and the meeting with him seemed suddenly to have filled up a blank in the brilliant existence of

which she had been but vaguely conscious before.

Percival, on his part, bore no malice whatever for her treatment of him in the past. He had been rather angry with her for having sent her sister to meet him that memorable night at Beauwood; but as the Forresters were, as far as the world knew, as happy as ever, he took it for granted that Helen had not got into a scrape, and so the matter passed from his mind. He very vaguely understood why Mrs. Westbrook had suddenly married the Prince, instead of the poet; the fact that she had done so was enough for him. The Princess was as handsome as Mrs. Westbrook had ever been, and no doubt the delightful freedom enjoyed in London society would give them many opportunities for pleasant intercourse. *The Prince was not "half a bad fellow," and a visit to the happy hunting grounds near Pesth would be a pleasant

change from Scottish moors and English coverts.

About a week after the first meeting in the Row, Percival, having seen Prince Michael on the box seat of his new four-in-hand coach, about to start from Hyde Park Corner for a ten mile drive out and home, jumped into a hansom, and went to pay Cecilia a visit.

He found her at home and alone, and she was very glad to see him. They chatted pleasantly on all manner of subjects for some time, then she suddenly unlocked the drawer of a table near, and taking out the letter of invitation, she threw it across to him, saying,

“That belongs to you by right—read it.”

He did so, hurriedly at first, then carefully, and his expression underwent a curious change as he did so.

“How is it that I did not get this?” he said.

"It was mislaid by accident," she answered. "I of course thought that it had been sent with the others, and I was dreadfully angry with you for, as I thought, not taking any notice of it, and it was only a week before my marriage that I found it in my writing-table."

Percival did not speak again until he had read the letter a third time.

"Queenie," he said then, using the old familiar name, "am I right in thinking that, if I had got this letter, and come to Ranmore Lodge, you would have married me?"

"Yes," she answered. "I intended that letter to show you that, if you asked me again, I meant to say yes; so you may imagine my wrath when you neither wrote nor came."

"By Jove!" he said, striking his hand upon his knee. "It is just like my confounded luck." Then he tore the letter

angrily across, and flung it into the fire.

"There, do not be cross about it," she said, laughing. "It was not to be, you see. I was fated to be a princess, after all."

"Ah! you might have taken it for granted that there was some mistake, and have written again," he rejoined. "I was savage with you, I confess, when I heard you had thrown me over for that author fellow, but I never knew that your affair with him had come to grief until I heard you were going to marry Prince Michael. How do you get on with him, Queenie? He hasn't too good a temper, I hear."

"Do not ask me any questions," she said, with a little laugh. "He does not beat me, and to write cheques ungrudgingly is the best cure for a bad temper that I know."

"Gold dust is by no means a bad blind, I admit," Percival answered. He was watch-

ing her attentively, but her head was bent over her work, so she did not notice him.

"Queenie," he continued, after a pause, "you owe me some compensation for having forgotten to send that letter."

She laughed nervously, and shrugged her shoulders.

"You know you do," he repeated—"compensation for that, and for one or two other things besides."

"But I never like either to acknowledge a debt or to pay one," she said, still bending low over her work. "But perhaps, if you do not ask too much——"

"Much!" he repeated—"oh! no fear of that. I am not an exacting sort of fellow. A little dinner at Richmond would please me better than anything."

"Oh!" she said, "is that all? Well, then, later on, when we have some summer weather. We must consult the Prince."

He laughed outright. "The Prince!

My dear Queenie, we do not want him. I ask you to dine with me—that is my idea of a pleasant party—not too many people, you know.”

“But if it is not mine?” she put in, rather faintly.

“Oh, that does not matter. Nothing makes such a charming whole as to bring two opposite ideas into harmony. I am sure you will like it. Do say yes, Queenie; remember that letter, and what I have lost.”

“Very well, then; I say yes. When is it to be?”

“Let me think for a moment. You are not going to Epsom, neither am I; then we could not find a better day than the festival of the Derby. The Star and Garter will be as quiet as a church. Will that suit your Highness?”

“Yes; but I must be back before ten, to dress. We are going to a reception at the French Embassy.”

"All right, I'll have you back in time. You had better run down by train, I can meet you at Richmond, and then we can come back together. Do you agree?"

"Yes," she answered. Then she added, after a pause, "I am going to do a very risky thing, Captain Percival; but I believe I can trust you——"

"Of course you can," he interrupted, "I was not born yesterday; besides, there is no harm in the world in a quiet little dinner at Richmond, now that you have got a husband to take care of you, only if I were lucky enough to be in his place you should not dine with him. But, I repeat, there is no harm in it, stupid people make a fuss, of course; but my motto is, never tell the world what it cannot understand! Surely such very old friends as you and I are may spend a few hours together to talk over old times without being obliged to give an account of ourselves? The only

drawback is that it cannot happen often enough."

"No," she rejoined, "even you could not think of asking for compensation twice."

"That entirely depends upon whether they give us a good dinner or not. And now I must be off. This day week will be the Derby. We are sure to meet in the meantime; but if not, look out for a note on the morning of the day to tell you the train to go down by. Good-bye."

Punctually at ten o'clock on the evening of the Derby Day Cecilia arrived at her own door from Waterloo Station. Percival had kept his word, and had not detained her a moment longer than she had wished to stay.

During the short journey from Richmond she surprised him by announcing that she intended to tell the Prince where she had been. "He is sure to hear about

it in some way, and then it will be worse for me."

"Then you must try a good shower of gold dust, if he is at all nasty about it," Percival answered, as he put her into a cab. "I have enjoyed my compensation thoroughly. Good night."

When she reached home, Cecilia asked, with rather a sinking heart, if the Prince had come back. She did not feel quite as brave as when she had parted from Percival.

Yes, the Prince had come back, and was "waiting for Madame in the drawing-room."

She went to him at once; but when she had closed the door, and found herself actually alone with him, she turned as pale as death, and her limbs shook under her.

"Well," he said, speaking in French, his favourite language when he was angry and did not want to swear. "Where have

you been? They could not tell me here what had become of you."

"I have been down to Richmond," she answered, with all the matter-of-fact composure she could assume. "It was so dull in London, I went down for a little change."

"Did you go alone?"

"Yes, I went alone; but I stumbled upon Captain Percival there, and we dined together."

"You dined together! Alone, may I ask? Is that an English custom?"

"Oh! yes, quite an English custom," she answered glibly. "There! pray let me go, you hurt me!" He had caught her by the arm to hold her before him as he questioned her. "It may be an Austrian custom for a husband to pull his wife's arm off, but it is not agreeable."

He pushed her away from him rudely.

"One never knows when you women

are telling the truth," he said rudely. "Still I suppose if you had been up to any mischief, you would have tried to hide it; but you had better be careful how you get yourself talked of, and, remember, I have warned you."

She was trembling inwardly, but excitement gave her temporary courage.

"Prince," she said, in her softest and most winning manner, "I believe you have had a run of ill luck to-day at Epsom, or you would not be so fierce with me for having dined with an old friend. Tell me, what it is? you know what a lot of money we have lying at *our* bankers!"

"It is true, *ma chère*," he answered, with a rapid change of look and tone; "but then, what you call the cheques of Madame are not the cheques of Monsieur."

"Oh! that is very easily arranged," she replied gaily. "I am always ready when you come short to give you as many as you want in this style."

She went to her writing-table, and presently came back to him with a cheque in which she had left a blank for the sum to be drawn.

“There! fill it up for yourself,” she said.
“And now I must go and dress.”

“My angel!” he said, catching her hand as she passed him, “you have saved my honour—pardon, pardon!”

The “gold dust” had been cleverly thrown!

CHAPTER IV.

IT is not needful, for the further delineation of her character, to give in detail a more minute description of the career of Mrs. Westbrook, otherwise Princess Petöfi. During the first year of her second marriage, a downward course was almost inevitable to her, for, having married a man to whom she was utterly indifferent, and having seen how much women can do and dare, she was without check or restraint of any kind. The excitement she had craved for had come at last, and, although, in her intimacy with Percival she cleverly contrived to escape detection, she gained, before very long, the unenviable

reputation of being one of the fastest women who had ever kept her place in society, for the very best houses were still open to her.

If the Prince was aware of what was plain enough to other people he made no sign, but he spent her money right royally. She was conscious that the expenditure, during those few months in England, was far beyond what it ought to have been, but she had not the moral courage to look into her affairs and to put an end to it, neither did she dare to refuse to supply her husband with as much money as he chose to ask for.

They were to have remained in England until after the regatta week at Cowes ; but about the middle of July there was a sudden break up of the Petöfi establishment in Grosvenor Street, the house was shut up, and the Prince and Princess had vanished. Then rumour, with her hun-

dred thousand tongues, set to work. It was said by one good-natured friend that the Prince had actually intercepted his wife at Charing Cross, as she was about to elope with Captain Percival; those who knew the gallant Captain well laughed at that story. By another it was affirmed that the fortune of the Princess had suddenly collapsed, owing to bad investments in foreign securities, that she and the Prince were utterly smashed, and had run away heavily in debt. At the clubs there was a story in circulation that a lady had suddenly appeared upon the scene and claimed the Prince as her husband, while it was perfectly amazing the number of people who discovered suddenly that they had never really liked "*that Mrs. Westbrook.*"

Of course not one of the stories was true, and even Cecilia herself, although she had a shrewd suspicion, never knew

exactly why she had been hurried off to Homburg at a few hours' notice ; but, unfortunately for herself in the future, she left a sorely damaged reputation behind her, and the friends who had been so eager to take her up were the first to pull her down.

A hundred tales, utterly without foundation, were circulated about her, and if a grain of truth crept by accident into any of them, it was grossly exaggerated. So much for popularity.

Not one word in defence can be said for the Princess, or, as I still like to call her, Cecilia Westbrook. She had gone on steadily from bad to worse until the last fatal step of all was taken, a step which a woman may repent of, but which she can never retrieve. If, when she had first entered the world as the beautiful and rich widow of the obscure Edgar Westbrook, anyone had told her that she could

have fallen so low she would have laughed them to scorn. She made very light in her own mind of the deception she had practised upon her first husband, she considered her double dealing regarding poor Leda Fortescue as one only of the stratagems that are fair in love ; but, although her disappointed soul craved for the excitement of the intrigue, she despised herself utterly for the weakness which had made her the toy of a voluptuary like Frederick Percival. It was not the sin she repented of, it was the weakness.

Unfortunately, we have many such women in the world—women who play with edged tools merely for excitement until they cut themselves to the bone, and with fire until they are metaphorically burnt to ashes.

After a stay of some weeks at Homburg—it was the Homburg of a few years ago, during which more of Cecilia's money

was lost at the gaming-table than her husband would have liked to confess—the Petöfis went back to Vienna. The Prince's duties about the Court obliged him to be in attendance for some months in the early part of the winter.

But from the time they left England there was a change in her husband's treatment of her, which filled Cecilia with a vague dread of the future. He gave way to outbreaks of temper which made her tremble before him, although she tried with all her power not to let him see that she was afraid; and on several occasions, when he was not obliged to appear in public, he was under the influence of wine. As yet wine and temper had not got the better of him at the same moment; on the contrary, his endearments when he had taken too much were infinitely harder to bear than his cold and contemptuous demeanour when he was sober.

Oh, how bitterly, in those miserable hours of degradation, did she regret not having accepted Percival's first proposal at Cayve Court, and how she railed against the untoward fate which had made her strive to win Saville's love ! As usual, she blamed her failures for her fall.

Although, to all appearance, without a wish ungratified, Cecilia was the most miserable woman in Vienna [during that second winter. She was alone and lonely in a crowd ; her health, too, was not very good at the time, and she was ordered by the Court physicians, who attended her, to lead a far quieter life than was agreeable to her restless spirit.

To drive about was her principal recreation, but she grew tired of the handsome carriages that were always at her service, and she pined for a little phaeton and pair of ponies, which she could drive herself. She wrote to Percival to send out

to her without delay both ponies and carriage, and, in what seemed an incredibly short time, they all arrived, but the unhappy Princess was never destined to use them.

Her husband, happening to pass through the courtyard of the Hôtel Petöfi, saw the ponies harnessed for the first time to the elegant little carriage, and a footman was just about to inform the Princess that all was ready for her inspection. She had already inspected the charming and well-chosen little equipage from a window of the *salon*, and she was just on her way to her dressing-room to prepare for her drive, when the door opened, and her husband appeared in a perfect frenzy of passion, which increased tenfold when she confessed, in answer to his fierce questions, that she had sent the commission to Percival to execute for her. He raved at her in French, he stormed at her in German,

calling her by more than one coarse name, and he finally relapsed into English, thereby showing his remarkable proficiency in the oaths of that language. Cecilia tried in vain to defend herself, but he would not listen. He said her extravagance was disgraceful, and she meant to ruin both herself and him; and he ended by declaring that in Vienna it would be considered improper for a lady of her rank to be seen driving about unattended.

At that point Cecilia called all her courage to her aid and defied him. She reminded him that the money she spent was her own, and she laughed to scorn the idea of impropriety. But her temerity was short-lived. The Prince swore, with an oath that made her tremble, that she should obey him; then, seizing her by the arm, he shook her violently. She was like a reed in his powerful grasp, and when, finally losing all control over himself, he struck her a

sharp blow, she uttered a loud shriek, and would have fallen to the ground fainting if he had not upheld her.

For several hours she was passing from one fainting fit into another, and for several weeks her life was despaired of. She was haunted by the idea that, in order to inherit her property, her husband would murder her, and when he made his brief visits to her room to inquire for her, she would tremble all over, and cower away from him.

One night her agony reached a climax. It was very late—quite two o'clock—she had fallen into one of her troubled slumbers, and her attendants were in an adjoining room, when she was aroused by hearing the too well-known step of the Prince in the room. It did not seem to concern him whether he was observed by his wife or not, for he stood quite within the circle of light thrown by the shaded

lamp upon part of the room, and called Cecilia's maid by name. When she came to him he asked for her mistress's keys, and the girl gave them to him without a word, and then retired again.

Another door in the bed-chamber led into a smaller room, which Cecilia had fitted up for herself in the English style, and in which she used to read, and to write her letters. During the first months of her marriage, her husband had often been with her in that room, and he knew that in a drawer of her writing-table was kept the precious document which would, in the event of her death, give him the whole of her property. Many times during her visit to England, Cecilia had thought of secretly making a change in the disposition of her property, but she had put it off from day to day, excusing herself for the procrastination by saying that it was time enough; and at last she had been.

hurried away from England, leaving the alteration still to be made.

During her illness, she had longed over and over again that she had taken her lawyer's advice, but her regrets on that subject were as nothing compared with the awful dread with which her husband had inspired her, and with the sense of degradation with which she remembered that he had struck her in his passion.

She did not think that she was going to die, and there was happily no one to tell her that the Austrian physician had declared her recovery to be almost hopeless. Directly the tidings were conveyed to the Prince, he decided that it would be well for him to have his wife's will in his own possession. It gave him no concern whatever to think that he was about to lose her ; he was tired of her, she had deceived him, but he had not been able to bring the deception home to her, and while she lived

she had more control over her money than was altogether desirable.

Like an inspiration the thought flashed upon Cecilia, when she saw her husband disappear into the boudoir, that her illness was looked upon as fatal, and that he had gone to make sure of the will. She heard him unlock a drawer and lock it again almost immediately ; then he came out again into the bedroom, but there was not anything in his hand except the keys. Those he threw noisily upon the dressing-table, and in another moment she was alone again.

"I must live long enough to disappoint him by making another will," she thought ; "and then if his brutality kills me—" A choking sob caught her at the moment, and for some time she was painfully agitated. "Oh ! if I had but known—if I had but known what was before me !" she moaned. "I am not eight-and-twenty yet,

and here I must live, tied to a coward who struck me, and far away from all my friends."

Her piteous sobs attracted the notice of her attendants. They came in and soothed her, and offered the food and stimulants she had so often turned from with loathing. She accepted them eagerly, for she had made up her mind to live.

In a few days the physicians saw a marked change for the better in their patient, and by the end of another fortnight she was able to leave her room. The first meeting between her and her husband was naturally full of embarrassment, but the Prince soon recovered himself, and carried matters with a high hand.

"You have seen the consequences of trying to disobey me, Madame," he said. "I warned you before we left England to beware how you attempted to hold any communication, direct or indirect, with

your *friend*, Captain Percival ; if it occurs again, you may prepare to spend the rest of your life in my château in Hungary."

She did not dare to answer him ; the threat he held out was terrible to her. A fierce anger burnt sullenly in her heart against him, and she spent hours weeping in secret over her miserable fate.

She had a vague fear, too, that even if she could get back to England a free woman, she might not find the position she had once held in society still open to her ; she knew that she had not been as guarded as she ought to have been in her intimacy with Percival, and the world is lenient only to those whom it suspects, not to those whom it has found out. Still she thought that to be in England, free from the galling chains she had put on so willingly, and yet an outcast from the exalted circle in which she had ardently longed to move, would be more bearable than the

misery of her life as Princess Petöfi.

Her brilliant and almost matchless beauty began to show traces of the mental agony she daily endured. She looked already more than ten years older than she had done the day of her second marriage, and she had recourse to art to bring back her beautiful bloom, to padding to restore the graceful curves of her figure, and to stimulants to keep her spirits and her courage up.

She and her husband were civil to each other on the rare occasions that they appeared in public together, but in private his treatment of her was cruel and cowardly in the extreme, and every action of hers was most jealously watched by the man who now longed for her death as ardently as she had ever longed for the death of the unhappy Edgar Westbrook.

For a long time she did not suspect that her letters to England were all examined

by the Prince himself, but when she did not get an answer to an important communication she had addressed to her lawyer in London, she knew there had been foul play. She had written to him to prepare a new will, according to the instructions she sent, but when more than a month passed without bringing her a reply, she accused the Prince with having intercepted her correspondence. He acknowledged that he had done so, told her, at the same time, that it was perfectly useless for her to try to outwit him, and reminded her of his threat to send her to Hungary if she tried open rebellion.

Just at the same time she found out that he had actually sold for a very large sum the beautiful place in Surrey, Ranmore Lodge, which she had furnished with such care, and which had been her really valuable gift to him on their marriage. It had been sold to a rich American from the

southern States, who was anxious to set up as a country gentleman in England, and who had already married one daughter to an English nobleman. The purchase-money had already been nearly all lost in gambling by the Prince.

With a kind of grim and humorous ferocity, he had himself given Cecilia all the above details. By some instinct he knew it would give her pain to hear that the house and estate had passed into other hands, but he did not know that, although she keenly felt his heartlessness in having parted with her gift, the only thing she was really grieved to lose was a little water-colour drawing, which had been done by Saville, and which she had hung in the room she intended for her own.

CHAPTER V.

THE third anniversary of Cecilia's second and most unhappy marriage had come round, and she had but just returned to Vienna with the Prince, from their annual visit to Homburg, when he was suddenly dismissed from his place at the Court, and his dismissal also meant banishment from the best society in the capital.

There was a grave scandal abroad, in which Prince Michael's name was so clearly involved that the eyes of the most lenient could not be shut to the evidence against him. A lady of poor but noble family, between whom and the Prince, it was said,

a strong attachment had existed before, and up to the time of, his marriage with Mrs. Westbrook, had disappeared, and it was supposed, with but too good reason, that she was living under the protection of her former lover. It was even said that she had been seen with him at Homburg.

No hint of this lady's existence had reached Cecilia's ears until after her husband had been dismissed from his post about the Emperor. Then she remembered that, during her stay at Homburg, she had seen, one afternoon, from the window of her private room in the hotel, a lady drive rapidly past, in the identical little carriage, drawn by the two beautiful ponies, which Percival had sent out to her from England, and the arrival of which had caused the first serious outbreak between her and her husband.

She had never dared to ask what had become of the dainty little equipage, so

she now supposed that, with the meanness and avariciousness habitual to him, the Prince had sold it, and had applied the money to his own use. But when, soon after their return to Vienna, open disgrace fell upon him, she felt sure that the lady whom she had seen in her pony-carriage at Homburg was the heroine of the scandal.

It did not hurt her to know that she had an avowed rival, to be neglected by her husband was now her only chance of happiness, and yet, with the inconsistency of a vain woman, she hated to think that she had been supplanted. To be in daily and hourly dread of her husband's violence, to know that she was not even safe from a blow from his cowardly and unmanly hand, was appalling to a woman of her timid organization—she shrank from physical pain as a child might have done—but to be a mere cipher in the household, to know that she was talked of and pitied by the

very servants over whom she ruled, and who took her orders, was galling to her pride.

To get away to England soon became the sole object of her life. Once there, her friends would surely rally round her, and she might, perhaps, be able to get, if not a divorce, at least a judicial separation.

At the bare thought of being free once more her heart would leap within her, and yet she despaired of being able to accomplish her design. She was rich enough, but from inability to look into her affairs, the impression grew upon her gradually that even her noble fortune was being taken from her.

With threats of personal violence, which she knew by past experience he would not scruple to carry out, her husband had forced her to sign a receipt which authorized her London banker to send over, to her as they supposed, all the bonds in their

possession upon the coupons of which the interest of the money, invested in foreign securities, was paid twice a year.

Like the majority of women, Cecilia was profoundly ignorant of the several sources from which her income was derived; but had she guessed that the harmless-looking paper which she signed, under compulsion certainly, put the Prince in possession of capital which had for years brought her in a third of her income, she would have been surprised beyond measure.

It may seem strange that the Prince should thus "kill the goose with the golden eggs," but to live while he lived, literally, taking no thought for the morrow, was his motto. The temptation recklessly to spend money was perfectly irresistible to him, and the forty thousand odd for the estate in Surrey, and the capital in foreign bonds upon which Mrs. Westbrook had received ten thousand per annum, made a

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bank which really seemed to him inexhaustible.

Even if his unhappy wife had known the havoc he was making of the splendid income which she had risked so much to win, she would have been quite powerless to check him. She just knew enough of her affairs to feel tolerably satisfied that it was not in his power actually to beggar her; but it was sadly humiliating to think that her money was going out like water to support him in his excesses.

Her efforts to escape to England proved altogether futile. Once she actually got as far as the railway-station, accompanied by her maid, and taking with her a few boxes, containing only some valuable lace and jewels, but suddenly, as if he had dropped from the clouds, her husband appeared, and, politely giving her his arm, he led her to the carriage he had in waiting. He did not break out into a passion,

but his face was white with suppressed rage, and from that evening, until she was obliged to go with him to his Hungarian château, she was kept a prisoner in her own apartments, and her beautiful lace and jewels were never again in her own possession.

There was only one person besides her own English maid (who was as closely watched as her mistress by the Prince) in the large establishment over which she reigned as nominal mistress, in whom Cecilia fancied she could confide ; and he was a young Pole who acted as a kind of secretary to the Prince. No one seemed to know exactly what his duties were in the household, but he really managed all the business connected with the Prince's estates, and his master, being shrewd enough to know his value, treated him with marked kindness and consideration.

This young man, who was known in the

establishment as Herr Joseph, had, from the moment of Cecilia's arrival, a contented, if not a happy bride in Vienna, been her most humble and devoted slave. Never had he seen a creature so bright and beautiful, and to gaze at her even from a distance was a happiness to which he looked forward with the eagerness of a child.

As for her, she rarely noticed him ; but she soon found out that he was a man of some weight in the household, and when she learned his name she used to speak to him sometimes in German. But once, when he was the bearer of a message from the Prince, he delivered himself in such excellent English that Cecilia, who was charmed to hear her native tongue from other male lips besides those of her husband, made him more than ever her slave by entering into familiar conversation with him. She got a short sketch of his history,

and when she thanked him in her most gracious manner—she would have been gracious to a chimney-sweep who looked at her with admiring eyes—he broke out into extravagant expressions of his willingness to serve her Excellency Madame, the Princess, to the last drop of his blood.

The poor fellow had been broken-hearted during her illness, and when he heard whispers throughout the household of the dreadful scene which had preceded the attack he had felt deadly enmity against the Prince his master, even while he came and went and did his bidding.

Cecilia had confided to him her intention of escaping to England, and, being suspicious of everyone about her when her project failed, she suspected him of having betrayed her to his master. But when, on the morning succeeding her attempt he was the reluctant bearer of the Prince's order to his wife to remain in her own apart-

ments until arrangements were made for her journey to Hungary, she accused him of having brought this fresh humiliation upon her, and the poor fellow fell on his knees at her feet, and protesting his innocence, she could not but believe.

He told her that her unhappiness "pierced and penetrated" his heart, and that to "win her freedom" he would gladly die. But what could a poor servant do? He could but "worship in silence the illustrious lady whose beauty and goodness struck all beholders dumb!"

Pleased in the midst of her misery with such a heartfelt outburst of homage to that beauty the power of which she had had of late but too good reason to doubt, the Princess gave Herr Joseph her hand, and bowing low over it, he promised, if possible, to make a plan for her escape.

But all hope of emancipation died quite away when, in the beginning of the long

and dreary winter, Vienna was left behind, and Cecilia found herself on the road to that far-off château in Hungary, which had been bearable to her only when it was filled with gay company. She knew that now not one of his former associates, except a few fast men who were fond of high play, would be his guests, and that she had not anything to look forward to but loneliness and isolation.

It was with the greatest difficulty that she maintained her self-control as hour by hour brought her nearer to the scene of what she knew she might look upon as banishment. Her husband travelled with her, and she could not bear to let him have the triumph of seeing how keenly she felt his cruelty.

She had not over-estimated the utter desolation of the life she had before her at the château that winter. It was a high, massive, rambling old building,

large enough to accommodate a regiment, and with immense and lofty rooms, in which one person felt absolutely lost. It stood on a plain which was surrounded, and almost shut in, by mountains, and the grim shadow of those bleak and barren hills seemed to penetrate every nook and corner of the old mansion.

Many and many a time, as the winter days began to close in, it seemed to the unhappy Cecilia as if she were not only alone in the great house, but alone in a wilderness. The wind used to roar and whistle outside until the unearthly sound almost drove her mad. Day after day she spent quite alone, and her meals were served with a stately solemnity that seemed to mock her loneliness. On very rare occasions the Prince honoured her with his presence at dinner; but the conversation between them was not of a lively character. She answered him as briefly

as possible if he addressed her ; but she seemed half afraid to speak above a whisper, and she never volunteered a remark—indeed, to anyone who had known her when she had taken the world, as it were, by storm but a few years before, it would have seemed hardly credible that the brilliant and witty Mrs. Westbrook and that silent, sullen-looking woman could be the same.

Had she been ever a good and unselfish woman, one who had been led away by bad example, but who was not innately fond of crooked ways, it would be possible to feel some pity for her at this stage of her career ; but even now, when she saw how utterly and miserably all her ambitious schemes had ended, and how impossible it had been for her to sway the world according to her own desires by means of wealth and beauty, she did not feel one iota of remorse for her conduct in

the past, and she was firmly persuaded that if she could but shake herself free from the bonds that now bound her she had a future before her sufficiently brilliant to satisfy one who had learned by sad and bitter experience not to aim too high.

By the middle of November the château was no longer empty ; but Cecilia did not benefit in the least by the arrival of the guests. They were all gentlemen, friends of the Prince, to whom his social position was a matter of indifference. The game was abundant on his estate, the wine was as yet plentiful in his cellar, his cook was an artist, and if any of the guests chose to bring with him a friend of the gentler sex he was free to do so, but wives were carefully excluded.

The apartments of the Princess were entirely shut out from the suites of rooms occupied by the host and his guests. Sport was the order of the day, gambling

of the night, and very often the sound of songs and laughter would reach Cecilia as she sat alone and unoccupied through the long hours of each winter evening.

She had tried over and over again to employ herself, but she was too utterly miserable. The work or book would fall from her fingers, and with her sad eyes fixed upon the leaping flames of the wood fire, she would pass the time, laying futile plans for escape from the awful thralldom of her life.

"Oh, for one hour in England!" she used to say. She longed to be able to make a fresh disposition of her property, and to set to work to try to get a divorce from her cowardly and cruel husband.

She had a terrible fear upon her sometimes that either her health or her senses would give way before she could carry out her designs, and that either death, or confinement for life as a mad woman, was

close at hand. She tried to bribe the servants to post her letters, but they took her money and handed over the letters to their master. Herr Joseph refused both money and letters; he knew his master too well to venture to drive him to take extreme measures to enforce Cecilia's obedience, and he advised her to have patience. If she were but patient, all would go well.

CHAPTER VI.

IT might have been possible for Cecilia to follow the advice of Herr Joseph, had not a whisper reached her ears that her husband had added another insult to the many which he had already heaped upon her by actually bringing his mistress to the château.

By fair means or foul she resolved to ascertain if the rumour were true or false, and one evening, towards the end of November, and at the close of a day of ceaseless rain and storm, she, having first worked herself up into a sort of desperation, formed the bold project of penetrat-

ing beyond the door which shut in that part of the château in which the Prince entertained his guests from the rest of the building.

She waited until about ten o'clock, and then, wrapping a fur mantle over her rich evening dress—she had specially adorned herself for the occasion—she left her own large and lonely *salon*, and went along the corridor that led to the other side of the house.

The corridor was empty and comparatively dark, but when she went through the door at the further end, she found herself in a small hall, or anti-room, which was brilliantly lighted, and in a chair by the fire sat Herr Joseph reading—it might be thought that he was there on guard. Opposite to her as she entered there was an archway, in which hung a heavy velvet curtain, and from the room within she heard voices and laughter.

Herr Joseph jumped up in amazement when he saw his mistress, and stood between her and the curtained archway, bowing respectfully. She let her mantle fall from her shoulders—or, rather, her fingers trembled so much that it escaped from them—and fairly dazzled him with her beauty. It was not what it had been, but in that brilliant artificial light all ravages had disappeared. .

“Stand back, Herr Joseph!” she said, in a low voice, in English. “I am going to join the Prince and his friends.”

“Pardon,” replied Joseph, with his hand upon his heart—“it will not make the happiness of madame to enter.”

“Stand back!” was her haughty answer.

He withdrew at once, and then, pushing back the curtain, she disappeared into the inner room. Very slowly she took in the scene before her, for her brain was bewildered with excitement, with the flood of

light, and with the noise of many voices; but presently her senses cleared, and a hot flush of outraged pride burned upon her cheeks.

There were about a dozen men sitting at a long table playing cards, and she saw little heaps of gold here and there, and heard the chink of the coin as it passed from hand to hand; but her eyes fixed themselves upon the head of the table, where her husband sat, and beside him, upon a low chair, trifling with some fancy work, which was often interrupted as the worker raised her head to look over the Prince's cards, or to reply to some whispered word, there was a handsome woman, richly dressed, and wearing a profusion of ornaments. In the puffs of her light hair were the brilliant diamond stars, and in her ears the diamond earrings which Cecilia had worn the day of her marriage, and which she had never seen since her hus-

band had intercepted her flight to England.

For some minutes she stood unnoticed, looking at the Prince and his companion; then she made a sudden movement forward, and the rustle of her dress was heard. About half way up the room she stopped short again—she felt cold and sick all over, as if death were coming just at the moment when full evidence of her husband's unfaithfulness was within her grasp.

When they saw her, all the men, except the Prince, rose with one accord. To some of them she was known personally, to all of them she was known by sight, and there was scarcely one of them hardened enough not to feel some degree of shame at being the witness of such a scene.

Presently the man who had been standing at the foot of the table went up to her and offered his arm.

"Madame," he said, "permit me. This is no place for you."

She waved him back without replying, and, advancing to her husband's side, she pointed to his companion, and said, in a voice which she vainly endeavoured to make firm and commanding,

"That woman's presence is an insult to me. I alone have the right to preside at this table to entertain my husband's guests."

The Prince laughed.

"Then by all means sit down, if it pleases you to make one of us," he replied, drawing up a chair to his left hand; "but this lady stays also. What say you, my friends? It is not often permitted to us to see two such handsome women together."

Cecilia's passion gave her courage.

"Coward!" she cried. "Do you dare to insult me before your guests?"

"I dare to make you give up playing the spy upon me, madame," he answered, starting up from his seat in a fury. Then he seized her roughly, dragged her by main force towards the doorway, and, catching up a little riding-whip from a side table as he passed, he struck her several times sharply across her uncovered shoulders as he pushed aside the curtain to allow her to pass through.

Although pain, and fear, and bitter, bitter mortification almost paralysed her, the unhappy woman was sensible of the cries of shame with which her husband's unmanly action was greeted, and amid a scene of the wildest confusion the party broke up.

She was sitting trembling and sobbing, scarcely able to move, and Herr Joseph was wringing his hands in a corner of the anti-room, when the man who had asked her to

retire before she had spoken to the Prince, came out and addressed her,

"Madame," he said, "we have felt for you, and I have myself taken the insult you have received," he struck his breast as he spoke, and bowing low before her he disappeared.

With the aid of Herr Joseph's arm, Cecilia reached her own apartments, and she spent the whole of that long night in an agony of mind quite indescribable. The idea uppermost in her mind was to make an appeal to the man who had shown some respect and sympathy for her before the others, and to entreat of him, if possible, to aid her in her escape to England.

And he did help her, but in a totally unexpected manner. She had hardly realized the fact that he had challenged the Prince to fight a duel on her account, but so it was. The combat arranged in

the heat of passion, when the gallant soldier—who was sadly out of place amongst the other boon companions of Petöfi—had fiercely resented the insult offered to the Princess, took place in the dim light of the November morning. They fought with swords, and the Prince was carried back to the château severely, if not mortally, wounded ; his antagonist escaped comparatively uninjured.

In an instant, as it seemed, the whole household was in an uproar when the Prince was brought in bleeding and unconscious. Messengers were sent in all directions for surgeons ; the unfortunate woman who had usurped the wife's place was carried fainting from her protector's room, while the wife herself, pale as death, trembling with excitement, and yet with joy in her heart which she could hardly restrain, was shut into her own apartments with Herr Joseph, making hasty prepara-

tions for her journey to England, while he with tears in his eyes—tears of shame for the master who had disgraced himself, and the mistress he was about to lose—carefully mapped out her route. Never before had she attempted such a long journey alone.

Had the moment of her release come at last? she could hardly believe it as, his work done, Joseph announced that the carriage was already waiting to take her to the nearest railway-station; but at the very last moment a fit of indecision seized her, and the carriage was countermanded. The Prince's state was declared critical, and, in spite of her restless longing to get away, she felt that she must remain until she knew whether she was to depart as wife or widow.

When evening came she was still wavering. One hour the report was that the Prince was sinking fast, the next that he

had rallied. Night came on, and worn out with excitement and fatigue, the Princess slept heavily. By the morning the tidings were that her husband was in a high fever, and that his case was considered hopeless by all the physicians.

Cecilia summoned Herr Joseph, and declared her intention of starting for Paris without further delay.

"I shall go mad if I stay here any longer!" she said. "And as long as that woman remains in the house, it is no place for me. You can telegraph to me to Paris whatever happens, and I must depend upon you not to give my address to anyone. If the Prince lives, he must not know where to find me; if he dies, I can come back here, or to Vienna, if necessary, to try to recover some of my property."

It was strange that the woman who had cowered like a timid child before her husband, should, when called upon to use her

brains in an emergency, be perfectly cool and collected.

Again the carriage was ordered, and Cecilia, dressed for the journey, was giving her last orders to Herr Joseph. Her hands were still ungloved, and on her finger, above her wedding ring, the diamond was sparkling which had been the foundation of her so-called success in life. She was not given to trace out cause and effect in the changes and chances that had come to her since the days of her ambitious girlhood, but that jewel was one link in the chain of events which had brought about her second brilliant marriage! Should she give it to Herr Joseph as a reward for his fidelity? That was the thought in her mind as she looked from it to him. It was worth a large sum, and of late it seemed to her that her valuable possessions had been vanishing rapidly out of her hands. She could not doubt that the contents of her

jewel-case had been given by the Prince to his mistress.

But still she was not ungenerous—or, rather, she could sacrifice a great deal to have her name well spoken of by her inferiors. She had worn the diamond constantly since Edgar's death. She was not superstitious, or she would not have done so. Many women of feeble mind would have looked upon it as an emblem of good or ill luck, to her it was merely a very valuable ornament, which had come to her with other gifts of fortune, but now the time to part with it gracefully had evidently arrived.

She drew it from her finger, and placed it in Herr Joseph's hand, saying,

"Let that remind you to be as faithful to my interests in the future as you have been up to the present."

"Madame," he replied, "the gift is too

valuable ; and I have not served for reward."

But she would not listen to him, and with great reluctance, and a strange presentiment of evil, the young man put the ring upon his hand.

In five minutes more Cecilia had left the gloomy château behind her, and she did not venture to rest until she had reached Paris, and there she waited, with feverish impatience, for news from Hungary.

As, years ago, when she had been little more than a girl, she had waited for the death of her first husband, so now she waited for the death of the second. She was a woman now. She had played many parts, she had succeeded and failed, she had eaten largely of the tree of knowledge, she had been alternately the slave of ambition and of passion, and now all her longing was to know how she stood with

the world. It was just possible that she might find it hard to regain her former place in English society; but surely the man for whom she had risked so much, the man whom, if she had been wise, she would have married years ago, would be faithful and steadfast to her now. Her fortune was still worth the acceptance of Captain Percival!

Herr Joseph alone knew her address in Paris, but days passed, and neither letter nor telegram reached her from him. The poor young fellow was not faithless, but her costly parting gift had cost him his life; he had been murdered on his way to Pesth, whither he was bound to despatch a telegram to Cecilia. Such deeds of violence were not uncommon in that wild district, so the fate of the young Pole caused no excitement, and the mystery connected with it was never cleared up. The diamond was, of course, lost sight of

for ever; it passed through many hands, and finally reached those of a rich Jew merchant in Amsterdam.

CHAPTER VII.

A WEEK passed, and still Cecilia was in Paris waiting for news. "Am I never to find anyone whom I can trust?" she thought, as day after day passed; then, quite unexpectedly, of course, she read in an English newspaper the death of Prince Michael Petöfi, and in the same newspaper a paragraph to the effect that—"An intimacy of too tender a nature having been discovered between the Princess M. P——, a celebrated English beauty, and Colonel the Count von ——, the Prince and the Count had fought a duel, in which the former had been killed." It was added

that there was a rumour to the effect that the Princess and the Count had fled together to England.

"If that story is believed, I am ruined," she said. "I must go to England at once and show myself; it will be time enough, when everything is settled, to go back to Vienna and see what I can secure out of my property."

But the slanderous tale troubled her sorely; enough that was true could be alleged against her, but now she must contend against falsehood as well.

"What shall I do if he believes it?" She was thinking of Percival; he had less reason than any man in the world to trust her, and yet in him now lay all her hopes of rehabilitation in the eyes of her world. He was but a broken reed at best, but she had not anyone stronger to lean upon in her extremity.

The intense anxiety she had suffered,

followed by the unexpected trouble of having to face and beat down the scandal which had got abroad concerning the cause of the quarrel between her husband and the Count, made her quite ill for a few days; but when she was again well enough to travel, she wrote to Percival to meet her on such a day and at such an hour at the Charing Cross Hotel. She was determined to make a bold stroke to regain at least a certain position in society by marriage with an Englishman.

“He will be kind to me,” she thought; “and if only I can right myself this time, no one shall ever be able to say a word against me again.”

Percival had never heard from Cecilia since he had sent over the ponies and carriage to Vienna, in compliance with her request, and he was extremely puzzled when he received her letter from Paris, asking him to meet her. He had read the

mysterious paragraph in the newspapers, and he had not at first associated it with her; but when he did so, it may as well be confessed that he firmly believed every word of it. When her letter arrived, he guessed she was in difficulties, and although, for reasons shortly to be explained, he was not anxious to mix himself up in her affairs, he was too true a gentleman at heart to refuse to help a woman who had appealed to him, if he could.

Punctual to the hour named by her for his visit he walked into her sitting-room at the hotel, and her feelings, so terribly excited by late events, were so little under control that she burst out crying when she saw him.

"Hallo! Queenie, you do look seedy!" he exclaimed, in his usual free and easy manner—those who did not know that he was one of the last representatives of a very old and noble family might have fallen into

the error of calling him vulgar. "Princess, I beg ten thousand pardons, I was thinking of old times."

"And I want you to think of old times, Frederick," she answered, impulsively, as she rose and held out both her hands to him. "I would give worlds to be able to blot the last four years out of my life ! You know what has happened, you know that my husband is dead ! Ah ! if I had listened to you—married you, what a different fate mine would have been ! Look at me, the wreck I am."

"Well, you have gone off a little, I am sorry to say," he answered, with brusque candour. "You've lost both flesh and colour, and that always tells upon a woman. I'm uncommonly sorry for you, Queenie ; but if the papers don't exaggerate, you've got some one to look after you, and you do not want me."

"I did not think *you* would believe that

slander," she answered, reproachfully. "I am alone in England, and I travelled from Hungary with my maid only. That paragraph is wrong from beginning to end. I have been living, I may say, a prisoner for some time in my husband's house, and he insulted and ill-used me in the grossest manner before a dozen of his friends. One of them, the Count von Reichel, took up my quarrel, and wounded the Prince in a duel. I could not have got away if he had not been helpless, and I waited in Paris until I heard of his death."

"By Jove!" cried Percival, who believed about a third of the story, although, as the reader knows, it was strictly true. "That Prince of yours seems to have been a pleasant kind of man, Queenie! And so you really bolted all alone? It was very plucky of you; but surely that Count Von what's-his-name was a lover? You might tell me, you know."

"I have never spoken a dozen words to him in my life," cried Cecilia, indignantly; "but he could not stand by and see me insulted. It is cruel of you to suspect me, Frederick," she added, "you ought to have known me better."

"Perhaps if I had not known you so well it would not have occurred to me to suspect you, my dear," he replied, with cool frankness. And she turned away from him, with a deep crimson flush all over her face.

"I think you would be kinder if you knew what I have gone through," she said, in a low voice, and then she recovered herself with a great effort, and gave him a minute account of the scene in the gambling-room.

"So, then, if his Highness had not slipped off the hooks it would have been a clear case for the D. C.," said Percival, when she had finished. "Well, my dear Princess, I

congratulate you upon being free again, and I hope your next matrimonial venture will be more successful."

"It cannot fail to be so," she answered, quickly and significantly, "if Captain Percival is unchanged."

"Ah, Princess," he said, "you must remember that things are not quite the same as they used to be between you and me; and remember, too, that at first your own will, not my fickleness, kept me off. Now it may perhaps interest you to hear that I am going to be married next week."

"You?" she repeated, with trembling lips—"you are going to be married?"

"Yes," he answered, too well satisfied with himself and his prospects to notice the keen pain he was inflicting. "I go into double harness next week. The young lady is an American—a Southern; but her people have come over to settle in this country. By the way, how oddly things

turn out, to be sure! Her father bought that place of yours in Surrey—Ranmore Lodge—when it was in the market some time ago, and he is going to settle it on Lizzie—my wife that is to be.”

“Then she is rich, I suppose?” Cecilia forced herself to ask.

“Yes, pretty fair—but not anything like your fortune, Princess. Still we shall do very well, for my blessed old uncle died last year, and we have come into part of our inheritance. How came you to sell Ranmore? You were not hard up, surely?”

“My husband sold it without my knowledge. I had given it to him on our marriage. I believe, if he had lived much longer, he would have beggared me.”

“Well, for a sensible woman, Queenie, I must say you have managed to make a pretty muddle of your affairs——”

“I know it,” she interrupted, with an

angry flash in her eyes. "Talk of something more agreeable. Is the future Mrs. Frederick Percival pretty?"

"The handsomest woman I ever saw in my life, bar one—yourself, Queenie—when I first met you," answered Percival, with his usual frankness. "And she is very fond of me—a statement which I could never make with truth about you, you know, Princess," he continued, touching her hand lightly. "You went in for a tip-top swell at first, then you had a weakness for a while for that good-looking little beggar who used to sing so well; and then nothing would do you but a *furrineering* prince. I always thought him rather a cad."

"And yet you were glad enough to put half England between him and you when I told you he meant to insult you publicly at Hurlingham, were you not? There, do not be angry with me. I know you were

careful only for my sake. I am very miserable, and everything seems to turn against me. I had hoped for a very different result from our meeting to-day; and you must not be hard upon me if I feel my disappointment very, very keenly."

"Yes," he said, speaking almost as much to himself as to her. "Women generally find out too late that there is some advantage in running straight."

They shook hands with one another, said good-bye in the most common-place manner, and Percival went off gaily by an afternoon train into Surrey, to surprise his future wife with a visit. She was a handsome, bright-looking, lively girl, and she was very proud of her conquest of the good-looking Englishman, who was so different from all the men of her acquaintance on the other side of the Atlantic. She picked up all his fast and slangy expressions with a readiness which amused him

mightily; and she was so good-tempered, and so fond of him, that he used to call himself the luckiest fellow in existence to have been thrown over by Mrs. Westbrook.

"It never does to marry a woman whom you cannot trust out of your sight for half an hour," was his thought as he recalled all he knew of "Queenie," mentally comparing her with the girl with whom he was going to settle down in sober, honest matrimony, and to be happy with ever after.

"So, that is over too," Cecilia said bitterly, when Percival had left her. "He might have forgiven my ambition when he remembers that after all I liked him well enough to risk my good name for him."

She had imagined that the sacrifice she had made had given her a hold over him, not considering that men rarely prize, or care to wear, a flower they have dragged through the mire. But that idea did not

occur to her ; and Percival had known well enough the nature he had had to deal with when he tempted her to be false to her husband.

False ! Yes, that cruel word kept ringing in her ears as she sat brooding over the last of the many humiliations she had lately endured. What gain had come to her from all her striving to attain position and power by means of her great wealth and almost matchless beauty ? Carried away by ambition, and half mad from disappointment when rejected by Saville, she had married a man who had cruelly ill-used and insulted her, then, allured far more by the fatal desire to prove how much she could do and dare with impunity, than by the reckless passion which leads so many women on to their ruin, she had allowed herself to be tempted to forget the sanctity of her marriage vow by a man who had once really cared for her as much

as it was in his nature to care for anyone.

She was now once more free, it was true, but she was standing in danger of misconception of the very worst kind—(for the story of her elopement with Count von Reichel was evidently believed in England)—and Percival had failed her, shaken her off in the coolest possible manner, and she felt that even if he had not been engaged, he would have done precisely the same thing.

In that bitter hour of friendlessness the remembrance of her cousin Edgar, the boyish lover and first husband, whom she had despised and deceived, and whose life she had made so miserable, came back to her. She saw his sorrowful eyes fixed upon her in mute reproach, and with a sort of wonder in them, as though he were trying to understand how so much beauty and heartlessness could live together. She heard his voice, which, until he lay on his death-bed,

had never failed in tenderness when addressing her, calling her by name, and asking, perchance, for some slight favour which she had coldly refused.

“ Oh ! Edgar, Edgar ! ” she cried out at last in her despair, “ you are avenged, for if you can see me now you know that the money I robbed you of, and the beauty you worshipped, have been my ruin ! ”

But still in that hard heart and perverted mind there was no true repentance, and her remorseful mood was of short duration. What was Percival to her that she should be so cast down by his desertion ? She might have known better than to expect gratitude from him—a selfish, heartless man of the world, with whom, if a woman’s name were once coupled, she would be looked upon with suspicion ever after.

Cecilia ignored the fact that, by her own conduct, she had forced Percival to see that, although he might enjoy her wealth,

the man who married her had a poor chance of finding either honour or happiness safe in her hands, and however lax in principle men may be themselves, they are generally desirous that their wives should be those whose price is far above rubies.

It was astonishing how quickly Cecilia pulled herself together, and prepared to put her position in society to the test when assured that her endeavour to right herself by an immediate marriage with her former lover was out of the question. Just as she had begun to scheme and plan when she had recovered from the shock of her last interview with Saville, so now she began to scheme and plan for the future.

She had not a moment to lose in giving every proof in her power that she had not come to England accompanied by the Count von Reichel. Some time had still to elapse before the London season began,

but Brighton, no doubt, was full of people whom she knew. Her first act was to have the death, *by accident*, of Prince Michael Petöfi, inserted in the *Times* obituary; then she supplied herself with handsome mourning, but not with widow's weeds. When the truth was known about her no one could blame her, or be surprised that she had not put on the orthodox but unbecoming trappings for such a tyrant as her late husband had proved himself to be. She finally went down to Brighton, took rooms at the fashionable hotel which she and her friends had been used to patronize, satisfied herself by a careful study of the visitors' list that the place was crowded by people whom she knew, and then sent an announcement of her arrival to the local papers—"Princess Michael Petöfi has arrived at the — Hotel for the season."

For a few days she refrained from showing herself in public, and waited anxiously

and eagerly for the cards of visitors or for the visitors themselves. The Dowager Lady Belgravia, with a married daughter, and Lady Frederica Southwark, and the Vane-Trevors were actually in the same hotel, but they did not take any notice of her arrival amongst them. Old Lady Wooddrake, who had been a fast woman thirty years before, who had professed the greatest possible affection for Mrs. Westbrook, and whom she and Percival used to laugh at together, and call old "fluff and feathers," was actually on her way to visit Madame Petöfi, as she was generally called in England, but she suddenly changed her mind, and waited to see what other people did. Lady Wooddrake was in the very best society, and she could not afford to compromise herself.

Nearly a week passed, still no visitors, and Cecilia's heart grew sick within her. What resource was left to her if she could

not force herself upon the notice of those who had once sought after and made much of her? She was, of course, unaware how constantly her unexpected appearance in Brighton formed the topic of conversation amongst her former friends. They fancied she was in Paris or Rome, somewhere abroad with her Austrian Count, and her audacity in coming to England and Brighton was positively startling.

The questions every morning, afternoon, and evening were, "Have you seen her?—Is she really here?—How is she looking?—Is she in mourning?" Then in a whisper, "Is the Count with her?" The men secretly admired her "pluck," the women wondered if "the creature expected to be noticed."

And noticed she was, but in a manner that made the blood tingle in her cheeks and veins. When she at last made her

appearance in an open carriage on the King's Road everyone stared at her, and all the ladies cut her dead. Gentlemen whom she knew, if they were alone, took off their hats, and one or two even stopped and spoke, welcoming her to Brighton as if it were the most natural thing in the world for her to be there, and as if her coming had been long looked for. Other men, if they were driving or walking with ladies, either bowed stiffly, or looked, with their companions, another way.

After a turn or two in the carriage, she got out to walk. It was just the place where she had met Saville walking with Leda Fortescue a few years before, and she remembered the expression of his face, as he looked at her, but too vividly as she went along. If she had had any lingering doubt as to what her reception was to be it was dispersed by the first group whom she met on the promenade. In it she saw at the first

glance Lady Frederica Southwark and Mrs. Vane-Trevor; the former was walking beside her mother's Bath-chair; the latter was in advance, and was surrounded by gentlemen. She blushed scarlet, and hurried on very fast when she recognised Cecilia, and saw that she was about to stop; Lady Frederica looked straight before her, while old Lady Belgravia, being short-sighted, stared hard at the handsome woman in black, whom she fancied she knew.

A few yards further on, she met Lady Monmouth, the widow of the well-known Earl of Monmouth, who had been equally distinguished for his gallantry in the field and in the drawing-room. "My lady" was undeniably a fast woman, for she had been living with Lord M—— for some months before the death of his first wife. She knew all about Cecilia, and when she saw the cut direct, given to her in front, she

looked up into her face, smiled, and bowed slightly. For a moment the Princess did not remember by whom she had been recognised; but when she did so, her mortification was complete. There could be no further doubt in her mind; Princess Petöfi, the once petted, praised, and admired Mrs. Westbrook, whose second marriage had been witnessed by Royalty itself, was cut dead. Women like Lady Monmouth were henceforth to be her associates.

But for one week she bore a brave front, and appeared in public constantly, and some of the men whom she had formerly known visited her. She was very frank with all of them, denied in the most positive manner the truth of the stories in circulation respecting the cause of the duel in which the Prince had fallen; but it was all of no use, she was obliged to accept her defeat.

Beaten, but not disheartened, her next resolve was to break new ground. Why should she not drop the hated title of Princess, and the equally hated name of Petöfi, and bury herself in the country, not as Mrs. Westbrook, but as Mrs. Calvert? She might perhaps gain new popularity by playing Lady Bountiful in a country village, charm the rector, dazzle the rector's wife, and find a new and interesting victim in the High Church curate.

She knew that in the first instance she ought to have looked into her affairs, ascertained how much of her income her husband had actually squandered, and also if she had not a claim upon some of the personal property he had left. To make a new will was also an imperative duty (Herr Joseph, while the Prince lay dying, had destroyed the old one for her); but she could not make up her mind to think about it just then. She did not know to

whom to leave her property. Who could tell what might happen? She was still a young woman. Perhaps it might be her fate to settle down at last as the wife of a country squire. It would be time enough to dispose of her property when she had disposed of herself.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE lapse of time had not brought about any change for the better in the position of Lord and Lady Forrester. They lived in the same house, but they lived almost entirely apart, and they never voluntarily met, or spoke to one another. Sometimes they went into society together, but by degrees Helen began almost wholly to give up going out, and there was a very general opinion abroad in *their* world that the Forresters were not happy.

It is almost needless to say that both husband and wife were miserable, and poor Helen often felt as if the burden and strain

were too great for her to bear. The world, with its usual acuteness, laid the blame of the estrangement upon Lord Forrester. That is, it said his temper was so overbearing that no woman could live with him, and it was also whispered—by the very ill-natured—that he was by no means such a saint as he looked ; a most unjust assertion to make about him, for there did not exist, especially in his rank, a man of such irreproachable moral character.

Hardly and harshly as he had treated her, his wife loved him still. She could not forget the pure and perfect happiness of the first years of her married life. She did not always think of him as the stern, suspicious, and unforgiving husband, who had told her that he had lost all faith in her, but as the tender, admiring lover, the fond bridegroom, and the proud father of their handsome boy. She knew that the only deception she had practised was in not

having told him of her foolish elopement before their marriage. In all else connected with that most unfortunate episode she had been truthful, and she had married him because she loved him, and not, as he had cruelly told her, because he could give her rank and liberty.

Her heart was very sore when she remembered his unbelief in her innocence, but she was still so angry with herself for having made it possible for anyone to suspect her that she often cried aloud in her misery and desolation, "I have deserved it all!"

As for Lord Forrester, had she but known it, he was far more wretched even than she was. He was angry with himself for having been so harsh and unforgiving to her, and he was angry with her for not either resenting it, or making an appeal against it. It did not occur to him that conscious innocence and conscious guilt

have very often the same effect upon a suspected person ; the former makes us patient and long-suffering, the latter silent. He forgot that, having once protested her innocence of all but folly, womanly pride might possibly keep Helen back from making any appeal for his forgiveness.

But it was not altogether pride that stood between them ; it was her utter hopelessness of being able to make any impression upon him, and also a feeling of shame at the idea of asking him to take her back to the position he had decreed she was to forfeit. He had been terribly angry at the discovery of her love-affair with Percival, and prompted by mad jealousy of her actions, even before he had known her, he had made many very harsh accusations, which in calmer moments he had bitterly repented. In his heart he knew that his wife had told him the truth about her elopement, but he could not all

at once forgive her for having had a love-affair about which she was ashamed to speak.

In a word, he was angry with himself for believing in her, and doubly, trebly angry with himself for loving her as dearly as ever. But the more the certainty of his own weakness, as he called it, forced itself upon him, the more obstinate he became in his determination not to break down the barrier between them, unless she asked him to do so. If she were to come to him, and to tell him that the estrangement was killing her, and that to be allowed to love him as of old was the one desire of her heart, he might allow himself the luxury of forgiveness, and make her happy by the confession that, with all her faults, she was still dear to him.

But Helen never came with this entreaty on her lips. He saw her every day, and it was often by the greatest effort that he

kept himself coldly and proudly aloof, and went on his way confident in himself—vain-glorious, although he did not know it, of his own rectitude, and still hard judging and unforgiving towards the failings of others. But an event occurred which proved to him that it was possible for suspicion to fall even upon him.

The Forresters did not spend much of their time in London. Lord Forrester was obliged to be there occasionally, while Parliament was sitting, to attend to his duties in the "House," but Helen and their boy were never with him then. She was either at Beauwood Chase, or at a charming little cottage which Lord Forrester had built by the Thames, near Maidenhead, and of which Helen was particularly fond.

Lady Olivia now lived almost entirely abroad. The summers she spent at the baths of Lucca, or in Switzerland, and the winters in Rome, or the South of France.

The sad death of Leda Fortescue had been a very painful shock to her, and the estrangement of her brother and his wife weighed so heavily upon her spirits that she could not bear to visit England.

Helen, as I have before said, went but little into society, and her chief friend at Beauwood was the rector of the parish, Mr. Ponsonby. He had lost his wife just as the separation began between the Forresters, and Helen had for a time felt very desolate without her. Calvert Hall was let to a rich merchant from London, Mr. and Mrs. Calvert were living in Germany for the education of their little tribe of young children, and between Helen and her sister Cecilia all intercourse had gradually ceased. They had not even met during the visit of the Prince and his wife to London the summer after their marriage.

There were no children at Beauwood

Rectory, but Mr. Ponsonby was the guardian of his brother's orphan daughter, Nina, a very pretty and very wilful young lady, who was just seventeen, and still at school when her aunt, Mrs. Ponsonby, died. Nina was heiress to a moderate fortune, and the care of her was a very serious charge to her kind but rather careless uncle. Soon after his wife's death the girl urged him to let her leave school and come home to keep house for him at the rectory; so she came to Beauwood for good, as it is called, when the estrangement between the Forresters had lasted more than three years. Nina Ponsonby was very pretty, but very silly and sentimental. She had big blue eyes, a pouting red mouth, and a plump little figure, there was not anything original or striking in her appearance, she was just a pretty girl, and she knew how to get her own way with both men and women. But Lady Forrester was the only one who did

not pet and spoil her, and in consequence Nina called her stiff and prudish, and avoided her as much as possible.

It was not, perhaps, altogether strange that she should have been as much attracted by the husband as she was repelled by the wife, and yet the latter would have been far more lenient to her than the former had she been guilty of any real indiscretion. Nina looked up to Lord Forrester as one of the wisest and most delightful of men. He was wont to spend hours with her uncle in his study, and she used to sit by, silently dreaming her own romantic dreams, while they talked and argued upon subjects far above and beyond her narrow comprehension.

Then they were all in the habit of taking long walks together, and while the old rector was tapping stones with his hammer, and collecting rubbish in a bag, Lord Forrester, who was not a geologist, used

to talk to Nina about poetry, of which she was very fond; and although his taste and hers were not always in accord upon the subject, she used to look up at him with intense admiration, and think that if only he were her uncle instead of that dear old perverse Uncle Ponsonby, she could tell him all her troubles.

All Nina's troubles, of course, meant one serious love affair, which had taken root in the midst of a large crop of idle flirtations. She had been in the habit of spending some weeks at a time, when she grew tired of housekeeping, with a married school-fellow who lived near Plymouth, and at her house she had met a young lieutenant in the Navy, who was handsome, gay, and dashing, and a flirt of the most finished order. Of course, he began by flirting with pretty Nina, and he ended by falling in love with her. Perhaps the knowledge of the fortune she was to in-

herit when she was one-and-twenty may have had some influence over him ; but then she was really very pretty, and she grew so fond of him that she actually almost gave up trying to attract other men.

At last, when the time came for her to leave Plymouth, he proposed, and they were engaged ; but when he followed her to Beauwood Rectory to ask her uncle's consent, he was somewhat summarily sent away, and Nina was not allowed to visit her friend again.

But the young people were not going to give one another up so easily. The uncle thought he had done his part when he had dismissed the young lover, and kept his pretty niece at home ; but Nina used to get the most frantic love-letters, dated *H.M.S. Victory*, under the very eyes of the rector, and, as a matter of course, she wrote replies. Then the young people had

some delightful stolen meetings when the lover managed to get leave, and to come over to the neighbourhood of Beauwood for a few days.

The impetuous young Navy man tried very hard to get Nina to elope with him, but she was too timid to consent, and their meetings more than once ended in something very like a quarrel.

On one occasion the young fellow had actually left her abruptly, and without a word of farewell, because she had refused to run away with him the next morning. He had planned how they were to be married at a neighbouring parish church, where neither of them was known, and then she was to go back to her uncle as if nothing had happened. She was crying very bitterly because she had vexed him by refusing, when Lord Forrester suddenly came up to her as she sat under the tree where her lover had left her. Lord Forrester was in

the habit of walking about in his beautiful woods, but this was the first time he had come upon anything less prosaic than a gamekeeper.

“Why, Nina, my dear girl,” he said, “what is the matter with you? What are you doing here by yourself?”

He had no idea how the foolish and romantic girl trusted and admired him, or perhaps he might have been more guarded in his demeanour. He made her get up and lean upon him, for she was trembling and sobbing, and then he walked up and down with her for fully half an hour, and by degrees she told him her story, having first bound him in the most solemn manner to keep her secret from the knowledge of her uncle and Lady Forrester.

To have confessions made to him by a pretty girl like Nina Ponsonby was quite a new experience for Lord Forrester, and very pleasant withal ; so without reflecting

upon all that strict secrecy in the matter might involve, if Nina were not very prudent, he gave the required pledge, and then she told him her story.

Lord Forrester was not severe upon a love affair when the lover's intentions were, as in this case, clearly honourable, so he was kind, and tolerably sympathising, although he did not approve of stolen meetings and a secret correspondence. As they walked and talked, neither he nor his companion noticed that they had been observed and stared at by two gamekeepers, who were on their rounds in the Chase, or that their perfectly innocent little conference had made one of the worthy men in velvet exclaim with emphasis, "Well, I'm blowed!" and the other, "Dash my wig!"

Early in the afternoon Nina had been seen from a distance, by the same men, sitting under a tree with a gentleman, and

when, later on, the gentleman turned out, as they thought, to be "my lord," the keepers were in no small degree amazed.

When Don Juan keeps an assignation, no one is surprised, but when an anchorite emerges from his cell, or when St. Simeon Stylites comes down from his perch to meet a young lady in the woods, all the world wonders.

So poor Lord Forrester walked up and down the ferny glade with the rector's pretty niece, quite unconscious of evil, or of prying eyes, and he gave her a great deal of excellent advice, which she promised to follow; and he escorted her home through the village, bade her good-bye quite affectionately at the rectory gate, and she looked up into his handsome but now habitually grave face, and thought what a pity it was he had such a cold, cross wife.

Then she went to her own room, and

wrote a penitent letter to her lover, a proceeding which was by no means in accordance with Lord Forrester's advice, and he went home to his late dinner, and sat at one end of the table, and Helen sat at the other, and they talked common-places before the servants, were almost silent during dessert, and, finally, they separated in a cold and formal manner, not to meet again until the next day at luncheon, or, perhaps, not until dinner-time. It was a most unnatural life for two people to live who at heart loved one another very dearly, but they were both too proud to make the first step towards reconciliation.

CHAPTER IX.

IT was quite in the beginning of summer that Nina had been met by Lord Forrester in Beauwood Chase, and on several occasions, as the long bright days wore on, he found her in the same secluded place, and over and over again she had told him her story, and confided to him how strongly her lover was still urging her to consent to a private marriage.

Lord Forrester was not always at Beauwood, it is true, but he was always ready, on his return from his visits to London, to hear all she had to tell, or, rather, all she choose to tell him, for he did not know

that, while she listened dutifully to his good advice, she had already acted in direct opposition to it by yielding to her lover's prayer for a private marriage, or that the discovery of her rashness was inevitable before the end of a year. In September, Lord Forrester was called to town on business, the weather was very hot just then, and he used to run down every afternoon to the cottage by the Thames.

He had been out for a row on the river one evening, before his eight-o'clock dinner, and after dinner he was sitting by the open window in the drawing-room, drinking his coffee and reading, when he heard a quick light step upon the gravel outside, and, to his intense surprise, the rector's niece, Nina Ponsonby, whom he believed to be safely with her uncle at Beauwood Rectory, appeared before him. She looked flushed, and very tired, and she carried a little bag, which she dropped suddenly upon the floor,

as though oppressed even by so light a weight.

"My dear child," Lord Forrester said kindly, but very severely, Nina thought, "what is the meaning of this? What brings you here alone at this hour?"

Of course poor Nina began to cry, and to implore of him not to be angry with her, but it was a long time before he could get her to account for her sudden appearance. At last, with many sobs, and piteous entreaties that he would not think hardly of her for having acted contrary to his advice, she confessed that she had been married early in July, acknowledged, with crimson blushes all over her pretty face, that she had telegraphed to her husband to meet her in London, at the Paddington Station, as it was impossible for her to keep the fact that she was married a secret any longer. She told him how she had waited in vain for hours at the station, and that at

last, being afraid to go back to her uncle, she had ventured upon the bold stroke of coming down to Maidenhead instead. She had heard from Helen that Lord Forrester was staying in Berkshire, and she had come to him as her only friend in her emergency.

He was very kind and gentle to her, but he gave her a severe lecture upon the folly of having married without the consent of her uncle, and he seemed rather inclined to look upon the young Navy man as an impostor. Suppose he were now to desert his wife, and to deny that the marriage had ever taken place, how was she to prove it? And what was to become of herself and her child?

But Nina stoutly defended her "darling Jack!" He had not deserted her, she was quite certain on that point. Her telegram had missed him in some incomprehensible manner, and he would come to-morrow without fail.

Lord Forrester, who had not the honour of "Jack's" acquaintance, was not convinced by Nina's arguments, and proposed to take her back to her uncle without delay. She begged and entreated of him not to do so, she even threatened to run away altogether, if he persisted, and she got so excited that he gave way, and promised to let her stay at the cottage until her husband either wrote or came to her.

The idea that anyone either could or would put a false construction upon his, Lord Forrester's, conduct, never entered his head for a moment. He did not suppose that anyone would suspect or accuse *him* of having eloped with the rector's niece, not even if it were known that she had taken refuge at the river-side cottage.

When she had calmed down a little, and was able to speak without sobbing, he gave her into the care of the kind and respect-

able woman who had the charge of the small household. Mrs. Forbes thought it rather odd that a young lady should come on a visit while Lady Forrester was away, but she was a wise woman, she neither jumped to conclusions, nor asked for explanations. "My lord could be trusted not to do anything he didn't ought!"

He went to town very early the morning after Nina's arrival, then he came down again by an afternoon train, was shut up with his young guest for quite half an hour, and then went back to town. The next day he came down much later, and stayed all night. Whenever Mrs. Forbes chanced to see Miss Ponsonby after his lordship had been speaking to her, she was always crying bitterly, and Mrs. Forbes could but hope that there was nothing wrong.

Lord Forrester had actually spent the two days at Paddington Station expecting that by one of the many trains from the

South the young husband would make his appearance. He had, with great reluctance, promised Nina to give "Jack" three days' grace; but if at the end of the third he had not shown himself, and acknowledged her as his wife, she was to go back to her uncle, and to tell him the truth. But before the close of the third day the affair took a new and totally unexpected turn, and Lord Forrester, the sensible, prudent Lord Forrester, had to confess to himself that he had done a very foolish thing indeed when he allowed Nina to remain at the cottage in the absence of Lady Forrester.

Early in the afternoon of the third day—Nina had disappeared on Tuesday, and it was now Friday—Helen was surprised to receive a visit from Mr. Ponsonby. She could not understand why he looked so grave and anxious, and, altogether, so unlike himself.

"What is the matter?" she said. "You look quite ill."

To her astonishment and alarm he broke down into tears.

"Ah! Lady Forrester," he said, "I am sure you will believe, when you hear what I have to say, that it would have pained me less to have cut off my right hand than to have been obliged to come to you this morning upon such an errand; but you must have heard the story sooner or later. I am aware, my dear friend, that you and your husband have not of late been living quite happily together, nevertheless"—the old man always spoke in the most measured and precise way—"nevertheless, it will, I know, shock and pain you beyond measure to hear that he has eloped with my niece, and that they are at this moment living together at his cottage in Berkshire."

"Eloped with Nina?" cried Helen.
"Arthur! my husband? My dear Mr.

Ponsonby, forgive me for saying so, but you must be under a delusion ! It is unfortunately true that Lord Forrester and I have not been quite happy together of late, but you cannot make me believe that he has been base and unprincipled enough to carry off a young girl like Nina from her home ! There must be some mistake ; he is quite incapable of such wickedness. You do not know him as I do, or you would not accuse him."

"Madam, the man who is capable of corrupting the moral nature of a young and innocent girl would be also capable of playing the hypocrite to you and to all the world. Had your husband been known to be a libertine, had he ever been heard by me to give utterance to sentiments of questionable morality, I could not have allowed Nina to associate with him on intimate terms. He has been the wolf in

sheep's clothing; I trusted her to him as if he had been her brother, and——”

“And you were quite safe in doing so,” interrupted Helen; she had listened impatiently to his wordy harangue. “Again I repeat I know my husband better than you do. Depend upon it there is a mistake somewhere. What evidence have you against him?”

“I regret to say that my evidence is too strong to be explained away,” replied Mr. Ponsonby, coldly. “She has been traced to Berkshire, to his cottage, and I believe she is there at this moment, if, afraid of discovery, he has not taken her away.”

“And even if she is there, and even if Lord Forrester is with her, which I doubt, he has not run away with her; you have no evidence to bring forward that she has ever had clandestine meetings with him here? You have always been with them in their walks and rides?”

"I believed so up to a day or two ago ; but since she went away, I have heard that he has been constantly seen with her during the summer in the most secluded parts of the Chase, and also——, but I prefer not to say any more to you, Lady Forrester ; enough is known to put all doubt out of my mind for ever."

"I am very sorry to hear all this," said Helen gravely, "but still my faith in Lord Forrester's honour is quite unshaken." Her voice quivered a little as she spoke ; she remembered how hard and unforgiving he had been to her, but the very remembrance of his harshness made her only the more certain of his innocence regarding Nina ; severe he might be in his judgments, but he was not a hypocrite. "Is it not possible," she continued, "that your informants, I do not ask who they are, may have been mistaken ? Nina may have

been seen in the Chase with some other gentleman—some one who looked like my husband.”

“It is not possible,” replied Mr. Ponsonby; he was deeply aggrieved and very obstinate. “The misguided girl had a lover when she was in Plymouth, a Mr. Dundas, a wild young man in the Navy; but when I dismissed him, of course there was an end of the affair. I do not think she cared very much for him; but although I knew she liked Lord Forrester, the idea that he was making love to her in secret never occurred to me. I thought I could have trusted her to travel alone with him from one end of England to the other.”

“And you might have done so,” Helen said warmly. “If Nina has got herself entangled in any foolish affair, depend upon it my husband is not her lover. No,

no!" and the wife's sweet face flushed all over. "I know he is not; you cannot make me believe it."

"Not even if you were to meet them together?"

"Well, I suppose if they went off together to France or Italy I could not doubt it then," she answered, "but as long as she is in Berkshire, where Lord Forrester and I are tolerably well known, I am sure the real lover, this Mr. Dundas probably, is somewhere in the background. I do not defend Nina for running away, remember," she added, "and I own I am surprised that Lord Forrester has not either sent her home or asked you to come for her; but no doubt all will be explained when we see him. And now we must think about what is best to be done. What is known in the neighbourhood of her elopement?"

"I fear it is being talked about a little to-day," Mr. Ponsonby answered uneasily;

he knew that he had himself talked too much before his servants when he was angry, and he did not like to tell Helen that public opinion had already set in strongly against her husband.

"Then there is no time to lose," she said. "I must go to Berkshire at once, and if I find Nina there I must bring her and Arthur back here at once; then if there is a lover in the background he must be found too, and if they are fond of one another, why, let them marry and be happy, poor things."

"But if all—if all is not quite as you hope, my dear Lady Forrester, you cannot bring Nina back here, you cannot expect me to receive her?"

"I can expect you not to be harder upon her than your profession enjoins you to be upon a sinner," replied Helen, very warmly. "And if—if it is true that my husband has led her into temptation, we

must still try to save her ; she must not be allowed to fall any lower. But I know he is innocent ; I am so sure of it that I do not mean to meet him as if he had been even suspected."

Mr. Ponsonby, still unconvinced, rose to go.

"Do you wish me to accompany you?" he said. "I hope not, for I fear I could not restrain myself if I found that unhappy, deluded girl with Lord Forrester."

"I think you had better stay quietly at home," Helen replied, "for I fear that, even if I go to town this afternoon, I cannot go down to Berkshire until to-morrow; but in all probability I shall find my husband in town."

Mr. Ponsonby said gravely that he hoped so, but Helen knew by his voice that he still held fast to his opinion. She had not spoken with greater confidence than she felt. Appearances were certainly very

strong against her husband—that she could not deny ; but, in spite of them, she was convinced of his innocence. Doubts of Nina did cross her mind more than once as she was on her way to London. The girl was very young and very romantic ; she might have fallen in love with Lord Forrester, and have followed him impulsively, without giving a thought to the folly and rashness of her conduct. But then, if that had been the case, he would have sent her back at once, before there had been time for any suspicion to fall upon her.

Another supposition quickly followed. Was it not probable that, in despair at being sent away by Lord Forrester—he could be so stern when he was angry—she had run away again, instead of returning to her home, and had come to some harm ? But that, too, was impossible. Lord Forrester would never have exposed her to

such peril; he would certainly have sent her back to Beauwood under proper protection:

CHAPTER X.

IT was past six o'clock when Helen reached London, not too late for her to go down to Maidenhead, but she went first to Beauwood House to see if her husband were there. He had been there in the morning for a few hours, but the porter believed "his lordship" had gone down again to Berks.

Helen went on to Paddington at once, and a little after eight she was at Maidenhead. She took a fly at the station, but she would not let it drive up to the cottage, so she walked, as Nina had done, carrying her travelling-bag.

There were lights in the drawing-room, but the shutters were not closed, nor the blinds drawn down, and Helen felt a little provoked that if, as Mr. Ponsonby had said, Nina and Lord Forrester were there together, he should so recklessly court observation from loiterers outside; but then the innocent have no need to take precautions.

She stood for a few moments in shadow upon the lawn, and looked into the room. She fully expected to see both Nina and her husband, but when her expectation was realised, she felt a flush rising to her face. Suppose that, after all, Mr. Ponsonby was right, and that her confidence in the man by whom she herself had been so mistrusted and misjudged was misplaced?

But as she watched him walking up and down—he had cleared a path for himself amongst the easy-chairs in the little draw-

ing-room—and then turned her eyes upon Nina, who was sitting in a dejected attitude upon a corner of the sofa, and evidently crying bitterly, her faith came back.

“He has not any idea what he is suspected of,” Helen said to herself as she went round to the front door and knocked loudly.

“Lord Forrester and Miss Ponsonby are in the drawing-room, are they not?” she said to the servant who let her in, as if the fact that her husband was there with a young lady was the most natural and proper thing in the world.

“Yes, my lady,” replied the maid; the cottage was not large enough to accommodate any tall footmen. In another moment Helen had joined them.

When Nina saw her, she jumped up and ran away into an adjoining room, for Lady Forrester was between her and the door leading into the hall, and there she sat,

waiting and trembling in the semi-darkness for what would happen next.

"I am so glad you have come," was Lord Forrester's greeting; and he spoke without any of the formality or restraint which was generally so very marked in his intercourse with his wife. "I was thinking of telegraphing for you the first thing to-morrow. That unfortunate child has got herself into such a scrape! And I am fairly at my wit's end about her."

"Why is she here?" asked Helen. She did not know how suspicious her tone was, but she felt provoked with Lord Forrester for being weak just where she had expected to find him strong. "She ought not to be here alone with you. Do you know what has been said of her, and of you? Do you know that you are suspected of having run away with her from her uncle's house?"

"Who has dared," he began haughtily

—then the reasonableness of the suspicion struck him all at once. . . “Good Heavens, Helen!” he said, “is this true? And do —do you believe that I am capable of such baseness?” He had gone quite close to her, and he looked eagerly, searchingly into her face as he spoke.

“Certainly not,” she answered, proudly and calmly. “You are not very lenient in your judgment of others”—he winced visibly—“but I am quite sure that, in spite of appearances, you did not bring Nina Ponsonby here. Had I thought that you were—were her lover, do you think I could have come here to-night? But you will have some trouble to clear yourself with her uncle, and I think you must have been a little careless sometimes. Mr. Ponsonby says you have often been seen walking with her during the summer in Beauwood Chase.”

Lord Forrester was silent for a moment ; then he said—

“That is quite true. But I have never spoken——”

Helen held up her hand to stop him.

“Assurances are not necessary to me,” she said. “I do not know why Nina Ponsonby is here with you, or why you have been unguarded enough to let her stay even for four-and-twenty hours, when you must know how ill-natured the world is. But that you are not her lover, I am perfectly satisfied. I do not ask for any explanation you may not feel at liberty to give ; but I do ask you to persuade the girl to come back with me to Beauwood as soon as possible.”

“Helen, you are the most generous creature in the world !” cried her husband ; but something in the expression of her face stopped him there, and he turned away with a sigh. The beautiful eyes, in which

he had so often read the language of love, were looking very coldly upon him just then, and all at once the mist of distrust through which he had been regarding her actions for so long a time, seemed to melt away, and he realized what a cruel wrong he had done her. He had often enough felt that it was hard to give her up as he had done, but hitherto he had been, to a certain extent, able to find excuses for persisting in his treatment by the unalterable, unexplainable, and wholly inexcusable fact that she had eloped with Captain Percival, and that she could not bring forward any satisfactory *proof* that she had been guilty of that one indiscretion only. Appearances were strongly against her, and he had more faith in them than in the word of the woman whom he loved. Now appearances were quite as strong against himself, and yet Helen believed in him, not, he feared, because she loved him,

but because she judged him fairly by her own knowledge of his character.

What a fool he had been ; how confident that slander could never touch, or suspicion never rest upon him ! It was humiliating beyond measure to find that he was supposed to have carried off a young lady from her lawful guardians while he had been most carefully protecting her, as he thought, from all the evil consequences of her rashness.

Just before Helen's unexpected appearance he had been telling Nina, as kindly, but also as decidedly, as possible, that the very next day she must go back to her uncle, as the young man she had so foolishly married had evidently deserted her, and the poor girl was in the very act of entreating him to go down alone to Beauwood—leaving her in Berkshire—to break the matter to Mr. Ponsonby—when the sight

of Lady Forrester had sent her flying from the room.

In great perplexity, and with a whirl of new thoughts and old feelings in his head and heart, Lord Forrester, when suddenly checked by the expression in his wife's eyes, began again to walk up and down the room.

"I see it all now," he said at last, with a sigh, "and I must have been blinder than a mole not to have known from the very first the injury I was doing both to Nina and myself, and to you, also, Helen, by allowing her to stay here even for a night. It was very kind of you to come to my rescue in this way; and I am really more grateful to you than I know how to express." Helen's lip curled a little. "I suppose Ponsonby will listen to reason—he will not persist in holding me responsible for having led that poor foolish girl astray?"

"Not if you can produce the real delinquent," Helen answered, with a little smile, "for I suppose I am right in thinking that there is a real lover in the background?"

"Lover!—there is a husband. The silly child is actually married, she says. She has put on her wedding-ring since she came here, and I can but hope, for her own sake, that it is all right."

"And did she run away to meet him?" Helen asked.

"Yes, her story is that, finding her marriage could not much longer be kept a secret, she telegraphed to this man—Dundas is his name, and he is in the Navy—to meet her at Paddington Station. He did not come, and not knowing what to do alone in London, she came down here to beg of me to help her. What she intended to do if she had not found me here, I do not know, for she was afraid to go back

to the rectory ; but I believe she knew I was in the habit of coming here. Twice or three times, perhaps even oftener, I have met her quite by accident in the Chase, but I know she was in the habit of meeting Dundas there. The first time I met her she had just parted from him, and she was crying so bitterly that I asked her what was wrong, and then she told me all about him. I advised her not to go on meeting him without her uncle's knowledge, and she promised to be very prudent and guarded ; but you may imagine of what little value my advice was, when she married him as far back as July, and now that she is in this scrape he takes no notice of her. She came here on Tuesday. It is now Friday, and I foolishly allowed her to stay on from day to day, hoping that this Dundas would either telegraph or come to her. I have spent all my time at Paddington looking out for him."

“And where is his ship?”

“At Plymouth.”

“Then either you or Mr. Ponsonby must go to Plymouth and find him. He must be made to acknowledge his wife; and in the meantime she must come to the Chase. Perhaps, when it is known that she is staying with me, people will believe that you did not run away with her. Now, will you be good enough to stay here while I go and look for her? Or I think I may as well say good night. It is very late.”

“Helen, stay with me for one moment,” cried Lord Forrester, eagerly; and she turned at the door to hear what he had to say. But now that he had arrested her, he seemed suddenly to have lost the power of speech. He was actually ashamed to ask her to forgive him then.

“I only wanted to ask if—if you dislike to do this—to take Nina home with you,

I mean ?—if you have any doubts remaining about her and me ?”

“Doubts remaining !” she repeated, rather haughtily. “Such a question is unnecessary, Lord Forrester, for I have never had any doubts. You once judged me very hardly, but I am not bad enough to try to make Nina’s friends believe a falsehood, even for your sake.”

Long pent-up feeling found expression in her hastily spoken words. She had never murmured against the hard measure her husband, in his jealous and suspicious anger, had meted out to her for the folly of her girlhood ; but now that their positions were reversed, as it were, and judgment of him had been put into her hands, she could not help the sudden rush of bitter feeling that filled her heart when he asked if she had any doubts remaining.

Before he could speak again she had hurried away, and she left behind her the

impression that her affection was estranged beyond the power of recall.

“I must put an end to this,” he said, when he found himself alone. “I must find out if enough of the old love survives to enable her to forgive me for all my unjust suspicions. What a fool I have been to have kept her at arm’s length all these years ; and the more I felt conscious of still loving her, the more I seemed to harden my heart against her ! How handsome she looked when she turned upon me just now ; and to think that I, *her* husband, have been suspected of a love affair with Nina Ponsonby ! But I deserve it all richly. The fools would not have dared to accuse me, had it not been known that I was living estranged from my wife ! My wife ! my beautiful Helen ! Oh ! to see those dear eyes once more looking lovingly into mine ! It does not often happen to a man to have to win his wife twice

over, but I must try to win mine now."

The expression of grave austerity, which had of late become almost habitual upon Lord Forrester's face, faded away altogether, as the idea of reconciliation with Helen took firm hold of him.

"I must wait until all this affair about Nina is over," he thought, "and until we are quiet again, either here, or at Beauwood. Then, if I fail, if she no longer loves me, I must go away from England, I cannot live this miserable life any longer."

The next morning Lord and Lady Forrester, and Nina, went down together to Beauwood. At Helen's suggestion, a telegram had been sent for an open carriage to meet them at the station, and many were the looks of surprise and incredulity sent after them as they drove through the little town to the Chase. The story of Nina's elopement with Lord Forrester had already gone far and wide, and yet there

she was, "sitting beside my lady, and with my lord opposite."

A message was quickly despatched to the rectory for Mr. Ponsonby, and when he came, Helen saw him alone, and told him Nina's story. He gave in doubtfully enough, but he could not gainsay the fact that Lady Forrester had actually got his niece with her at Beauwood.

"And now what do you propose to do?" he asked.

"I propose to find Mr. Dundas, and to have the announcement of the marriage put into the *Times* without delay. Nina and her husband must be seen together, both here and at the rectory, and if that does not put an end to the slanderous gossip of the village and neighbourhood, Lord Forrester and Mrs. Dundas must just live it down."

"You have been very good to her, I must say," said Mr. Ponsonby, who felt

that he ought to say something grateful.

"And to myself too," Helen answered. "My husband's good name is as dear to me as my own." He was not present, so she spoke warmly. "Poor little Nina has been very foolish, but, after all, we must not be too hard upon her; think how much worse it might have been."

"You think she is really married, then?" said the suspicious uncle.

"I am sure of it; and I cannot help hoping that Mr. Dundas will have some good excuse to give for his strange silence. You and Lord Forrester must go to Plymouth to-morrow, to look after him; and please make it as public as you can that you are to dine here this evening."

But even at Plymouth Dundas could not be found. The day before Nina ran away, the *Victory* had received sudden sailing orders from the Admiralty. The British flag had been insulted somewhere the other

side of the world, and two men-of-war had been ordered at once to go and punish the aggressors without delay, so it was probable that months would elapse before Dundas could be again in England.

He had never received Nina's telegram, and as he did not dare to write to her unless he had an envelope addressed by her own hand, he was obliged to sail without letting her know. The poor young fellow was sadly put out, and had at first serious thoughts of deserting; but honour proved even stronger than love, and he found what comfort he could in the hope that Nina would understand and not misjudge him when she heard of the sudden departure of the *Victory*.

But this totally unlooked-for event created a serious complication. The idea that Dundas was either ill or faithless had suggested itself to Lady Forrester. That he had been ordered off at a few hours'

notice, and that it would be impossible to hold any communication with him for months, was a contingency for which she was not prepared.

When poor little Nina heard the dreadful news, that the *Victory* had left England, she collapsed utterly, and became quite passive in Helen's hands. She explained, entirely to her own satisfaction, the reason why the young man had not written to her before he left, and reproached herself bitterly for never having sent more than one envelope at a time addressed to Miss Ponsonby. If he had had a supply by him, this mischance could not have happened.

She was so ashamed and confounded when she was told that she was supposed to have run away with Lord Forrester, that she could not bear to see him, so she stayed almost entirely with Helen, who was very kind to her, far kinder than a woman

who had not known what it was to be tempted would have been.

But the serious question of what was to be done with the young wife during the absence of her husband had to be settled without delay. To announce that she was married, and not at the same time to be able to produce Dundas, would only strengthen the already wide-spread belief that Lady Forrester and Mr. Ponsonby were trying to gloss over the grave fault committed by the niece of the one, and the husband of the other. Already Helen's conduct in the matter had been amply discussed, and some severely blamed, while others praised her magnanimity in screening her guilty husband.

Lady Forrester looked the affair steadily in the face, and when she found that she was quite powerless to turn the tide of public opinion, she decided that it would be better

for Nina to be sent away somewhere until her marriage could be proved.

Lady Olivia was the person chosen to take charge of her; she intended to winter in the south of France, and she was then spending the autumn in Switzerland. She consented to receive Nina, really to oblige Helen, and she promised to be kind to her. The peculiar circumstances of the case, and the fact that the young wife was about to become a mother, made her at first shrink from the responsibility; but she could not resist her sister-in-law's entreaties, and she even came as far as Paris, where Helen met her with the poor girl, who was now no longer the bright, happy, wilful creature of a year before.

"I can never thank you enough, you have been so good to me," she sobbed, as she clung to Lady Forrester to say good-bye. "I believe you are the only woman

in the world who would have believed my story without some proof, and indeed, indeed I am sorry to have given so much trouble."

She certainly had given trouble, and of a very serious kind, but she had also done some good; she had made Lord Forrester think less highly of himself, and she had roused Helen from the apathy in which she seemed to have spent her life since her separation from her husband. She and he had been meeting more frequently than usual during the past few weeks, and she felt that she could not any longer endure the anomaly of her present existence; so she determined, once for all, to ask Lord Forrester to allow her to live altogether apart from him.

She came to this resolution on her way back from France to Berkshire, where he was again staying. She felt very tired and worn out when she at last reached the end

of her journey, for she had stayed but one night in Paris, and she was beginning also to suffer from the reaction of all the worry and excitement she had had about Nina.

But before rest was possible she had to nerve herself for one more trial, that of proposing to her husband complete and final separation. She was weary to death of the part she had now been playing for nearly four years.

my own dear loving wife once more."

He came nearer, for she had risen when he began to speak, and tried to take her hand, but she drew back.

"You must not confound what you call my noble generosity with—with a warmer feeling," she answered, with icy coldness of look and tone. "I could not believe that you were Nina Ponsonby's lover, not because I cared for you as of old, but because I know that you are honourable and high-principled, although very harsh in your judgment of others. We are not all constituted alike; you think badly of all women who have once made the slightest mistake, and you would have been very hard upon poor little Nina if she had trusted to the honour of Mr. Dundas, and had been deceived. That is your nature—you cannot help yourself. I know that, if you had forgiven me the only deception I had ever been guilty of, and had allowed

me to prove my disinterested affection for you, all would have been well between us. That I had been foolish, I could not deny, but I was not unworthy of your love."

"I know it but too well," he said very low.

"Yet you believed the very worst of me," Helen went on rapidly, as if she had not heard him, "and, quite as much for the sake of your own pride as to spare me, you condemned me to the miserable life which has lasted for nearly four years. Now I demand to be set free, for I cannot, and I will not, bear it any longer. Your presence is but a daily reminder of the misery I have gone through; if my fault was great, my punishment has been greater still."

"This is really your wish?" he answered, surprised out of his usual calmness by the vehemence of her appeal. "You will not listen to me when I tell you how deeply

and sincerely I repent of my want of trust in you ; it has been brought home to me but too keenly by the events of the past few weeks. Helen, it is your husband who pleads—is my fault beyond forgiveness? I love you, God knows how dearly !”

“It may be so,” she answered, with the same icy coldness, “but no such plea can weigh with me now ; and besides, pardon me for saying so, I think you deceive yourself ; you will be much happier when we are apart.”

“I can see that you will,” he answered, so sadly and hopelessly that her heart was stirred, and she had to turn her head away quickly to hide the tears that rushed to her eyes, “and your wishes must be complied with as soon as possible ; then I can go away—away from England, I mean—and by the time I come back, if I ever do come back, the world will have given up talking about us.”

"Ever?" she repeated, half involuntarily.

"Yes," he said—"why should I come? You can bring up our boy."

She longed to tell him to stay, but the words would not come, and when he asked her if she would not say "good-bye," she gave him her cold hand in silence, utterly unconscious that he had made up his mind not to see her again before he left England. But when she was alone, tired as she was, she sat on far into the night with the word "ever" ringing in her ears.

"And yet I am sure I do not love him," she said. "A year or two ago I might have listened to him, if he had come to me and spoken as he did to-night; but now it is too late."

Is it not ever thus? With our own hands we shut ourselves out from our earthly Paradise.

The next morning, Lord Forrester went early to London ; his wife's indifference had changed the whole aspect of life for him, and his wish was now to get away as soon as possible. He was not too proud, but he was too hopeless, to make a second appeal to her.

He planned out a tour which would take several years to accomplish—he meant, in the first instance, to go to America, and then across the plains to the Pacific. If he started immediately, he might get some sport on the way. “And if I leave my bones in some far-away spot,” he thought bitterly, “it will not matter. Even my boy loves his mother better than he loves me.”

He had on the table before him, amongst his maps and some business papers which his lawyer had brought to be signed, a beautiful miniature of Helen, and the lovely eyes spoke to him eloquently of the happi-

ness he had vainly tried to bring back. "I have this to remind me of her," he said, as he closed the case and laid it aside to put into his travelling-bag.

He had intended to run down to Berkshire to see her again, but he changed his mind at the last moment, and wrote to her instead. He told her the day he was to leave, and the name of the vessel by which he was to sail from Liverpool, and explained that Mr. Reed, the lawyer, would tell her all the arrangements he had made for her separate maintenance. By not so much as a word did he betray the sorrow that was wringing his heart as he wrote.

But as soon as Helen knew that it might be years before she saw him again, her proud heart was humbled and softened, and she longed to recall the unkind words she had said to him. The look of disappointment and desolation that had gradually gathered and deepened upon his face

when she reminded him of his injustice, and spoke doubtingly of his renewed love, haunted her sleeping and waking, and her misery and remorse reached their climax when the evening came upon which she knew he was to start for Liverpool to meet the Cunard steamer.

The London morning papers did not reach Maidenhead until noon, and the day after her husband's departure Helen was sitting at luncheon when they were brought in to her. More from idleness than from interest, she took one of them and opened it, but presently all the colour faded out of her face, and she felt that she was turning sick and faint, for she read in large letters: "Terrible railway accident, and loss of life between London and Liverpool." The train by which her husband had travelled, an express, had dashed into a goods train, and the damage and loss of life was, so the telegrams said, impossible

to estimate. The first-class carriages were smashed to atoms, and all the first-class passengers had been terribly injured, and many had been killed.

Scarcely knowing what she did, and with a feeling of utter hopeless despair at her heart, Lady Forrester rang the bell and ordered a carriage to come at once to take her to the station. She could not rest for one moment until she had ascertained her husband's fate. It was but a short journey to town, and yet the train seemed to her only to creep along, her misery and impatience were so great.

"I shall never see him again," was the burden of her thoughts ; "and if I had not been so proud and so unbelieving, he would not have made that journey. Ah ! if I could but tell him how sorry I am, and that I do love him still !"

She drove at once from Paddington to Mr. Reed's chambers in Lincoln's Inn.

He was not at home—out of town, in fact, but in less than half an hour he rattled up in a hansom from King's Cross. He had been away in one of the midland counties, and on his way up he had read the news of the accident.

The shock was so great that he came into his office in a state of excitement and consternation far exceeding that of Lady Forrester herself. But then he had read a paragraph in the *Times* which had escaped her notice.

She read it with hot, dry eyes, while he stood before her, running his fingers through his hair, and wondering to himself why husbands and wives could not agree. The paragraph was as follows:—

“We understand that Earl Forrester was a passenger in the ill-fated Liverpool express, the terrible accident to which we report in another column. His gun-case, and other articles belonging to him, have

already been picked up among the *débris*. It is said that the unfortunate nobleman, who was universally esteemed and respected by all classes, was about to proceed on a tour round the world. He is succeeded in his title and estates by his only son, who was born February 18, 18——”

The paper fell from Helen's shaking hands.

“Oh, how am I to bear it?” she said—
“for I believe there is no hope.”

“I greatly fear so,” said Mr. Reed. “But I think I had better go to Euston at once and make inquiries.”

“You had better go down the line and see if—if they have found—anything.”

She could not say “found him,” and yet she had a frightful vision of her husband's mutilated body being thrown about unrecognized and uncared for at the scene of the accident.

“And do you think of waiting for my

report here?" said Mr. Reed. He was half afraid to leave her alone. She was outwardly calm, but her pale face, parched lips, and hoarse voice told what she was suffering.

"I think I can bear the suspense better here," she said. "I do not suppose you will be very long away."

"A great deal must depend upon what they can tell me at Euston. If there's really no hope, I had better telegraph to you that I have gone down the line to make—to do what is necessary."

He took her into his own little sitting-room, and there he left her alone. She sat down in an arm-chair, because it happened to be close to her; and there she remained motionless, thinking of her husband. She fancied she saw him again, standing before her, and making his touching appeal to her to forgive him. She remembered the sound of his voice, and then

suddenly she remembered him as she had seen him for the first time, standing up in his boat amongst her little brothers and sisters. He had often told her since how he had fallen in love with her at first sight, and somehow the memory of the unfortunate affair with Percival faded altogether from her mind at the moment. The agonized and remorseful wife, who knew at last how dearly she loved her husband, had no thoughts to give then to the folly of her girlhood.

She could not have told how long she had been sitting there waiting for Mr. Reed, when she was suddenly aroused, and all her senses were awake in an instant. She fancied she had heard her husband's voice. She sat up, and listened intently, but it was all a delusion—the house was perfectly still. “Ah,” she thought, “how often that fancy will deceive me during the long years I may have to live without him !

Oh, Arthur, Arthur ! my love ! my love !”

She threw herself upon the ground beside the chair, and sobbed wildly and bitterly. Was she not terribly punished for her dogged and unwomanly pride ? It had given her such satisfaction to deny him, when he had asked her to be reconciled, and had pleaded his love for her with such tenderness in voice and eyes, but where was her triumph now ? She had never ceased to love him, yet she had refused to listen to him, and had sent him to his death.

It was growing dusk in the little parlour behind the office when Mr. Reed came back.

“You have some good news,” Helen said, when she saw his face.

Strictly speaking, he had not any news, but he was not as hopeless as he had been when he left her. Several of the officials were of opinion that Lord Forrester had

not been in the train at all ; that he had found out, on arriving at the station, that he had still a day to spare before the steamer sailed, and that he had ordered his servant to start with the baggage, and to wait for him at Liverpool.

But then, on the other hand, two porters declared they had seen Lord Forrester in a first-class carriage, just before the train started ; again, a news-boy, who had read the account of his lordship's death in one of his papers, said a guard had told him that Lord Forrester had been at Euston that very morning, about eleven or twelve, but the guard had gone off on one of his journeys, and the boy's tale was not believed. So Mr. Reed, very much puzzled, had come back to Helen to make his report.

"I do not like to hope," she said, "because the men who say that he did not go may not have known him."

"And the men who say he went may

not have known him either," replied Mr. Reed. "So, you see, we cannot be certain."

"Not until you have been to the scene of the accident," said Helen. "I wish I could go myself, but I know I could not bear it. Besides, my boy is alone at the cottage, and I ought to go back to him. There is a train to Maidenhead at seven o'clock, and it is not six yet. I know you will make every possible inquiry, and you must telegraph to me the first thing to-morrow."

Mr. Reed took her to Paddington, but she scarcely spoke a word during the long drive from Lincoln's Inn, and she was very thankful when the train started, and she was alone with her sad thoughts once more.

The last time she had made the journey from town at that hour the days were

longer and it was scarcely dusk when she had reached the station, but now she could hardly see even the outline of the cottage, as she walked up from the gate. The windows, too, were closed now, but there was the faint reflection as of a fire shining through the blinds.

As is sometimes the case in country houses (the servants not having been round to shut up for the night), the hall door stood open, and Helen went in without ringing. She could not bear to see anyone, not even her boy, until her suspense was over. There seemed to be so many conflicting opinions about Lord Forrester's fate that she hardly knew what to think, but her fears almost forced her to look upon the darkest side.

She crossed the hall, then hesitated for a moment. Should she go at once to her room and try to sleep away the hours that

must elapse before she could hear any further news from Mr. Reed ? But she was faint from want of food, and she could not hope to keep up her strength without taking some ; so she turned away from the stairs, opened the door of the drawing-room, and went in.

There was a fire, but it was scarcely bright enough to show clearly the objects upon which the flickering light fell, and Helen's heart seemed to stand still as her eyes fell upon a motionless figure in a chair which stood directly in front of the hearth. But one man in the world had any right to be there, and even if he were still alive he was not in Berkshire. And yet—she stole forward breathlessly, half afraid to confirm either hopes or fears ; but in an instant the light of joy was upon her face again. Her husband was reclining there calmly asleep before her ; his hands were folded, and between them he held the case

containing the miniature of his wife. The last object upon which his eyes had rested before sleep came upon him had been her pictured face.

"He does love me," she said softly to herself. Then she stooped over him, and the touch of her lips upon his forehead and the warm tears that fell unbidden with the kiss, awoke him.

"Where am I?" he said. "Who is this?"

Her arms were round him, but her voice was so choked she could only sob out, "Arthur, forgive me!"

He clasped her to his heart in silent rapture. It was one of those ecstatic moments which strike the voice dumb. Intense feeling has no power to expend itself in words, but the reconciliation between the long-parted husband and wife was complete. Lord Forrester did not want to know what had broken down the

barrier ; Helen's head was leaning on his breast, and the love-light was once more shining in her beautiful eyes.

But after a time, even lovers—be they married or single—come to their senses again, and are able to explain to one another how unexpected events have been brought about, so Lord Forrester told his wife why he had not travelled by the fatal train.

The porter's story had been quite true ; Lord Forrester had found, on inquiry at the station, that he had miscalculated the time by four-and-twenty hours, and that to catch the steamer for New York he need not start for Liverpool until the next day.

“So, my darling,” he said, “I came here to get one more last look at you. Of course, I could have gone to Liverpool and waited there for a steamer, but the longing

to see you again was irresistible, so I came down here instead."

"You came here?" she repeated blushing, wife though she was, under his fond admiring gaze, "but how was it? You were not really here, at the cottage, were you?"

"Yes. I was here, and I was quite half an hour standing outside that window looking at you. The lamps had been lighted, but the windows were still open, and, of course, everything in the room was quite distinct to me. You were sitting by the table yonder, and you had a book, but you never turned a page all the time I watched you. You looked sad, I thought, and I wondered if you were thinking of me."

"I was thinking of you all the evening, for I supposed you were about starting on your journey, and it grieved me to remem-

picture, and I was thinking how providential it was that I had come for my little stolen peep at you when I fell asleep."

"Then, under God, it was your love for me that saved your life," said Helen, reverently, as she raised her head to meet his kiss. "Oh, Arthur, I think if you had died I must have died too, for the agony of remembering how I had let my pride stand between us would have been too terrible to bear. Can you forgive me—everything?"

"My own dear love! can you forgive me? As Olivia often told me, I behaved like a fool or a madman, and when I think of your noble trust in me when appearances were so strong against me——"

"But not so strong as against me," she interrupted, in a whisper.

He clasped her still closer to his heart,

"Let by-gones be by-gones, my darling! I know now the worth of the true heart. I

wounded so cruelly in my jealous anger."

"Do you know, Arthur," said Helen, next day, when she and her husband were writing a joint epistle to Lady Olivia, "our reconciliation was a very tame and common-place affair, after all. I did not scream or faint, or do anything I ought to have done when I found you asleep by the fire."

"But you did what was far more agreeable and sensible, darling—you gave me a kiss. But I suppose that is tame and common-place between a mere husband and wife."

CHAPTER XII.

IT is like a migration to another planet to come down from London to settle in a quiet village, or small country town, in Hampshire, Devon, or Dorset. In the former, within sight of the blue sea, and yet almost under the shade of the grand old trees of the New Forest, there is a charming little town, quiet, without being absolutely dull, surrounded with pretty and attractive if not grand scenery, but happily too little known to be overrun by tourists or autumn visitors.

There are a few county families in the neighbourhood, and they make society for

one another, and they are not too high and mighty to be friendly with the town's-people. There is a first-rate grammar-school at Combhurst, of which the inhabitants are justly proud ; and in the whole of England there is not a prettier rectory than the rambling two-storied house, covered on one side with roses, and on the other with Virginia creeper, which was the home of the young rector of Combhurst, Frank Lumley. He had been a distinguished scholar at Oxford, and he held extreme High Church views. It was not generally known, but it was suspected, that he advocated celibacy for the clergy of the Anglican Church, yet, in spite of his advanced opinions, he was a very genial and pleasant gentleman, and by no means averse to the society of women.

To see him now, on a bright evening in May, as he leans against the organ in his picturesque little church, which, by energy

and perseverance, he has had "restored" into a perfect little temple, he does not look as if Nature had intended him for an anchorite. He is listening to a mass of Mozart's, and his dark eyes are fixed upon the beautiful face of the lady who is playing.

Never before has Frank Lumley seen a face so lovely as that of the young widow, Mrs. Calvert, who, about two months before, had come to Combhurst, and taken the little cottage which might be said to join the rectory, for the garden of the latter and the miniature pleasure-ground of the former ran side by side.

Of course the rector, as in duty bound, had called upon his new parishioner. He would have done just the same had she been old and ugly; but it was pleasant to find that she was neither the one nor the other, and, also, that she was intellectual, and able to play classical music on his be-

loved organ. Through his influence, she was visited by the county people, but she let it be known that in consequence of a recent affliction she could not go into society, so her life at Combhurst was quiet in the extreme.

The truth was, she was a little afraid to accept invitations. It was just possible that she might meet some one who knew that her name was not, and never had been, Mrs. Calvert, at the houses of her new acquaintances, and she did not choose to run the risk ; besides, she had had enough, and more than enough, of society ; she knew every move in the game, and after her recent experience of the fickleness of the fashionable world, she felt inclined to be cynical, and to keep aloof from companionship.

She made an exception, however, in favour of Frank Lumley ; besides, he was her near neighbour, and she was constantly

meeting him, and it was agreeable to her to have an intellectual man to talk to. He had been rather shy with her at first, as though he felt half afraid to associate on intimate terms with one whose conversation was so much more interesting than that of the old women in the village whom he visited with conscientious regularity once in every week. He used to tell himself that it was her conversation he found so delightful, but he could not long hide from himself that her beauty was her greatest charm. After all, he was only eight-and-twenty.

He tried very hard to get Mrs. Calvert to take an interest in his parish, but he failed utterly. She told him frankly that she was not good enough, and not sufficiently interested in children to take a class in his Sunday-school, or to go about reading the Bible to the sick poor.

“The right feeling would grow upon

you, 'dear Mrs. Calvert," he had said, in his earnest and slightly sententious manner. He could not associate the idea of anything except goodness with that exquisite face and perfect form. Those who had known Cecilia when she was Mrs. Westbrook, could have told him how much of her bloom she had lost since her second marriage. She was very lovely still, and the tranquillity of her life at Combhurst, although it must be confessed that it was at times monotonous as compared with the whirl to which she had been accustomed, had done much to bring back the brightness to her eyes and the natural colour to her cheeks.

Music was her great resource at that time, especially if she wanted to escape from disagreeable thoughts. If she tried to read even the most amusing and exciting of modern fictions, memory would begin to work, and it was her own history she

saw on the pages before her. "If I were to write my recollections," she was wont to say, "what a much more interesting book they would make than any of these I get from Mudie!"

And yet, although all the scenes in which she had been an actor were so clearly impressed upon her memory, it seemed sometimes as if the events of the past could not have happened to her, as she contrasted the "fitful fever" of her life, from the death of Edgar Westbrook up to the moment of her humiliation on the promenade at Brighton, with the peaceful monotony of Combhurst. Had she ever known Leda Fortescue?—had the brief but uncertain joy of her engagement with Edward Saville ever been hers?—had he really cast her off with hard and cutting words?—had she been one of the chief actors in the gorgeous ceremonial which had transformed Mrs. Westbrook into the Princess Petöfi?

—had she ever been mad and wicked enough to accept Percival as a lover when he could not be her husband?

She could not pretend that he had deceived her, and led her into a trap; no, she was an experienced woman of the world, and she had not the shadow of an excuse to offer for her conduct. But the most seemingly unreal of all the incidents of her life were those which had taken place in Hungary; and yet she shuddered still as she felt again in imagination the sting of the Prince's riding-whip upon her shoulders. It was not surprising, therefore, that she took refuge in music. It was not that she threw her whole heart into it, as some restless and unhappy people can do, but it soothed her—helped her to bear the present and to forget the past.

She was not blind to the fact that, without an effort on her part (for, to do her justice, she had not tried to captivate him)

the young rector of Combhurst was rapidly becoming enslaved by her beauty. She saw all his struggles to resist the fascination; she noted how he tried to avoid her, and how futile all his efforts proved.

Of all the residents in his large parish, Mrs. Calvert seemed, after a time, to be the one most in need of his daily visits; and so it went on throughout the summer. He did not know what the end would be, but he knew at last that he loved this beautiful stranger as men such as he love but once in a life-time.

Principle, or, rather, the ideas in which he had been educated, and passion waged a long and very unequal conflict in his mind. Was she a snare sent by the enemy of souls to entrap him unawares, or was she the angel who was to cheer and brighten his path through the wilderness?

I am painfully aware that, in describing the growth of Frank Lumley's love for the

beautiful woman whom the readers of this history of her life know to be utterly worthless, I am going over ground that has been traversed many and many a time. But the axiom that there is nothing new under the sun is perhaps more true as regards the joys and sorrows, trials and temptations, which meet us in real life and in fiction, than it is of any other thing in the world. In real life, as in fiction, which ought to reflect some aspect of human life, either from the bright side or from the dark, many a manly and consistent young Christian gentleman has given all the love of his heart to a woman such as we know Cecilia Westbrook to have been, and has found his mistake, perhaps, when he has called her by the holy name of wife, and has seen his child upon her bosom. But in fiction we can save him from such a fate, if, indeed, the exigencies of the story do not demand his sacrifice.

Lumley used to sit up half the night thinking about her when, as was not unfrequently the case, he had met her wandering about alone by the sea-shore, and had escorted her back to her home. Those walks in the sweet twilight of summer, with Mrs. Calvert leaning upon his arm, were almost too much happiness for the ardent and impressionable young clergyman; and when he had said good night at her own door, and, with his dark eyes fixed upon her, had tried to read in her beautiful but perfectly calm face if the wild desire to call her his own found any echo in her heart, he would turn away, to begin anew the conflict which well-nigh maddened him. Was love for mere earthly beauty to turn him aside from what he had fondly believed were the fixed principles of his life?

And then, supposing that he could at last find comfort in the conviction that, although a priest, he might marry, was there

any hope, even the faintest, that such a radiantly beautiful creature as Mrs. Calvert would ever love him, and become his wife? There were moments when he fancied he had seen those lovely eyes melt into tenderness, or flash with a light which, to poor weak human nature, is more alluring still. He thought over all she had told him about herself, and how little it was, after all. Who was she? Why had she come to this quiet country place? Was she without friends? She had told him, half laughing, one day, that she neither got nor wrote any letters. He had not thought much about it at the time, but was it not a strange fact, in those days of cheap postage?

He fancied she was rich, from her surroundings in her house, and from her dress, but about her income, as about herself, she was silent. Had she a history, then, and was it sad, or tragic, or both? Good and

noble she was, he had no doubt on those essential points. He would have staked his life that her name stood far, far above the reach of slanderous tongues! Could a cheek and chin so exquisitely moulded belong to a woman who had ever been guilty of an act of which she was ashamed? So the lover reasoned. Had any words save those that were pure and truthful ever fallen from those beautiful lips, or been conveyed in a glance from the sweetest eyes in the world?

And with what feelings did Mrs. Calvert, as Cecilia now called herself, regard this, her latest conquest? She was gratified to see that her beauty had not lost its power, that was all. She was indifferent to the man whom she soon found she could sway with a look, and make tremble from head to foot with a touch of her hand.

"Ah!" she used to say, "if Edward Saville had but felt for me what he does,

mine would have been a very different fate !”

Sometimes she amused herself by trying her power over him, by being alternately graciously kind or frigidly cold, but in her mind there was uncertainty almost as great as in his. She could not decide whether to accept or reject the proposal which she felt sure Lumley would sooner or later make to her.

She hesitated, because, for the first time in her life, it had begun to dawn upon her that there was a wide difference between right and wrong. Her easy creed, up to the present, had been that the crooked road was by far the most agreeable to walk upon; but her experience, since her return to England, had taught her that, although up to a certain point those who outrage the fixed laws of morality are tolerated, and even encouraged, a time comes when the Tower of Siloam falls upon some half-dozen,

or it may be upon one only, not one whit worse than those who stand unharmed about the ruin !

Suddenly and unexpectedly the "Tower" had fallen upon Cecilia Westbrook, and the shock had been a very rude awakening ! She could scarcely understand at first what had happened. She knew what she had been from the very outset of her career. During her last visit to England her conduct had been reckless in the extreme, she had seemed almost to defy public opinion, and yet, up to the very day that she had been hurried off to Homburg by her angry and suspicious husband, she had been received at all the very best houses in London.

Remembering all this, it now seemed doubly hard upon her to be ostracized from society for what she had not done. But, after a time, she accepted the situation philosophically enough. She knew that no amount of protestations on her part could

clear her from the charge of having eloped with the Austrian Count von Reichel. She often laughed to herself as she went over her private history, as it is known to the reader, and thought what a successful humbug she had been. Would any of those fashionable fine ladies—some of whom contrived so successfully to keep the eleventh commandment, "Thou shalt not be found out"—have followed her lead, as they had done contentedly enough, had they known the story of the diamond ring, or her deception of Leda Fortescue? Now that her career as a recognized woman of fashion was at an end, she longed to be able to assemble her former associates around her, and to tell them the truth about herself—how they had fêted and caressed her, while she was successfully carrying out the most cruel deception ever planned by a heartless woman, and how, when really sinned against herself, and in

sore need of friends, she had been coolly thrown over, and all kinds of slanders circulated and believed against her.

She was too keen-sighted not to know that she richly deserved her downfall, but that did not make it the more easy to bear. She had had, during her imprisonment in Hungary, some vague longings after a more truthful and honest life. As the famous heroine of "Vanity Fair" was wont to say that she could be very good if she had five thousand a year, so Cecilia Westbrook, when even in her own estimation she had sunk very low indeed, thought she might be able to recover her usual complacent self-love, if she could but start fresh as the wife of Captain Percival.

But that resource had failed ; and when, in the quiet country place in which she had buried herself just that she might have time to think over and determine upon her plans for the future, a means of re-

habilitation presented itself in the shape of marriage with the young priest, who would have hidden himself away from her in the farthest corner of the world had he known what she was. She hesitated and doubted. She did not love him, so in refusing him the pain would not fall upon her ; but even her worldly nature could not help feeling respect for the noble unselfishness of his life, and for the purity which marked every thought that he put into words.

Could she drag him down to her level? Could she add yet one more to the many deceptions she had practised, and accept the love which, in offering it to her, Frank Lumley fancied he was offering to a woman pure in heart and life as she was perfect in face and form? No, she could not do it. She pictured his agony if even what was known of her history should ever reach his ears. Would not the shame of having to stand detected before him be almost

more than she could bear? "I am not a good woman, but I am not bad enough for that," she said to herself, as she sat at the window of her little drawing-room, and watched the light burning steadily in the room which she knew to be the young rector's study. She could see plainly across the garden and pleasure-ground that lay between the two houses. Was he writing his sermon, or was he thinking of her, she wondered?

"I am out of place here," she went on, following out her train of thought, "and I ought never to have come. I am rich, and I can make a little world of my own in London, gather celebrities about me, and make my house the resort of men of intellect, instead of men and women of fashion. It will grieve him, poor fellow, but he would thank me, if he knew what I am about to spare him."

The term for which she had taken the

cottage at Combhurst would expire in another month, and she resolved during that time to keep as much as possible out of Lumley's way. She must avoid walking alone by the sea, and give up her practice of sacred music in the church.

But Lumley had also made up his mind. The beautiful creature who had won his heart must be his, if it were possible to win her, and her efforts during that last month to avoid him, only added fuel to the fire. He saw in them the coyness of the modest woman, who flies from what she prizes most on earth.

CHAPTER XIII.

ONE evening, just a week before the day Mrs. Calvert had fixed for her departure from Combhurst, Lumley came unannounced into the room where she was sitting, alone, of course. She was not surprised, although he did not often visit her at that hour, unless she asked him to do so.

His manner, when he spoke to her, was agitated, and when he took her hand he held it fast for some time.

“I have heard that you are going away,” he said, “and I—I have come to ask you if it is true. Forgive me for such a late visit, but I could not wait until to-morrow.

Are you really going to leave—Combhurst?"

"When I came I intended to stay about a month," she replied, "and now it is just the end of September, and quite time to think about winter quarters."

"And I, that is, we all hoped you intended to make your home at Combhurst; the winter season here is unusually mild, but perhaps you do not like the place."

"I like it very much," she answered, "but I did not think of making my home here."

"Could you—would anything induce you?" he began nervously. "Mrs. Calvert—Cecilia—oh! how you must despise me for not being able to speak to you!" he broke off suddenly, as he leaned his elbows on the table, and covered his face with his hands.

Cecilia looked at him keenly and curiously. Of all her so-called lovers, this man

appeared to be the most in earnest.

"Why do you think so? Why should I despise you?" she asked softly.

"Because I have not courage enough to speak out, because I am so unmanned in your presence!" he cried, starting up, and standing before her. "I love you so much, and the thought of losing you has so overpowered me, that I feel as if life without you would not be worth keeping. Tell me that I have not been living in a fool's paradise. If you can give me only simple liking, I am contented, but let me call you mine, I cannot live without you!"

"Oh! yes, you can," she answered, amused rather than touched by his earnestness, for so many men had told her the same thing before. "People do not die of love, I have seen too much of the world to believe in lovers' raptures any longer."

The bitterness of her tone struck him at once.

"You have not been happy in your life," he said tenderly, as he knelt upon one knee by her side, and, in spite of her resistance, took her hand in his. "I do not ask you to tell me why, but I do ask you to trust your future in my hands. I know I can make you happy. You were right to reprove me for saying that I could not live without you, and I accept the rebuke. Of course, I should live as long as God pleased, and, I hope, do my duty in His service, for I know we have not been sent into this world just to have our own way, and never to bear any pain or trouble. But oh! Cecilia, my darling—let me call you so for once—share my life with me, and let us do our appointed work together. I make no more protestations of love, because words fail me when I try to tell you what you are to me."

She let her hand stay in his as he pleaded, with his earnest eyes fixed upon her

face. She knew that not even by the infatuated Edgar, whom for his weakness she had despised, had such words of real love been addressed to her before; passionate pleading she had heard and listened to, but she had learned, to her cost, what such pleading meant. This man loved her, and oh! how bitter was the remembrance of her reckless life as she looked at him! She could scarcely understand the conflict in her mind. She did not love him, but what a refuge his love might prove, if only she were bold enough to accept it!

“There are two reasons why I must not listen to you,” she said at last, and the matter-of-fact coldness of her tone and manner struck even upon her own ears. “I do not love you, and I am not worthy of you. The first reason you may not think sufficient,” and she smiled faintly, as the sudden pressure of her hand showed

her that she was right ; “ and the second you may look upon as merely conventional—what all women, in fact, say to their lovers.”

“ Yes,” he interrupted ; “ when I look into your beautiful face, I do not shrink from your idea of unworthiness, but the acknowledgment that you do not love me is hard to bear.”

“ And yet, if I were to profess love for you without feeling it, would you not easily find out the deception ?”

“ You are right,” he said sadly, “ and, as you have told me, you do know the world better than I do—an inexperienced girl would not have answered as you did just now—but I am willing to risk all, your want of love, what you call your unworthiness, if you will but be my own dearly-loved and honoured wife. Ah ! Cecilia, do not turn away from me ; beautiful as you are, it is impossible for you to win

greater love than I feel for you. Do not reject me !”

Moved by an almost uncontrollable impulse, Cecilia felt herself about to yield to this new and earnest lover. He, at least, loved her for herself, for he did not know how rich she was, and she was irresistibly attracted by the strong feeling which he held under with so firm a hand. But remembering what she had been, she felt afraid to accept him. Then she did what so many women have done under similar circumstances : she resolved upon temporizing, she asked for time.

“Do not think I am utterly heartless, or insensible to the great honour you have done me,” she said gently, as she drew her hand away from him ; “but if I give you an answer to-night, it cannot be the answer you wish for. I believe you love me, but I think you spoke out on the impulse of the moment when you heard I was going

away. Consider for one week whether you would be wise to marry a woman who does not even pretend to love you—a woman whose capacity for loving has long since died out, and who has been accustomed to a very different life from that which, as your wife, she must make up her mind to live. Then, if your affection for me outweighs all these considerations, come back and tell me so. I may then, or I may not, have some confession to make to you.”

He rose from his place by her side. “You have given me a harder task than you think,” he said, “and you put a terrible temptation before me. Every word you have said stabs me like a knife, for if you had even an iota of love for me, that love would have pleaded with you to spare me such a trial. I know what my decision ought to be at the end of the week, and I know what it will be. I never loved anyone before, and I think, even if you

hated me, I could not bear to give you up."

"And if I really were unworthy—Frank?" She came up to him, and laid her hand upon his arm. "If some one were to tell you that I was a wicked woman, what then?"

"How you delight to torture me!" he answered fondly, looking down at her.

"But I must have an answer," she said imperatively.

"Then, if it were true," he said, "dearly as I love you, Cecilia, my duty to my God would make my way plain before me. He has not, as I once thought, shut out His ordained servants from the joys of earthly love, and I could not, as a minister of the Gospel of forgiveness and peace, forsake those who have strayed from the right way; but if I were knowingly to join myself to one whom even the world's elastic moral law had condemned, how could I

dare to stand up and preach to my people?"

Cecilia's face had grown very grave as he spoke, for in his words and voice there was an earnestness that made itself felt. Never before had she been so much impressed. The rigid conventional morality of her brother-in-law, Lord Forrester, had always excited her ridicule, but here was something nobler than any mere doctrine of morality, or high-sounding system of moral principles. Frank Lumley might hate the sin, but he would pity the sinner. Lord Forrester would turn away from both sin and sinner alike.

She withdrew her hand from his arm quickly, and a sudden rush of colour spread itself all over her face. What did it mean? It meant that she was ashamed to stand there before him, seemingly innocent, but knowing that she was guilty. For years she had gone on delighted to think that she was receiving undeserved homage from

an admiring world ; now she felt hateful in her own eyes.

But the unwonted self-condemnation did not last long ; no doubt Lumley had spoken as he felt, but he had never been put to the test. She did not believe that, even when she had told him as much of the truth about herself as she thought fit, he would give her up ; but she did not mean to tell him anything just then—it would be time enough when the week was over.

It is not easy for two people who have just passed through such a scene as I have recorded above to sit on for any time and talk of common-place and indifferent matters ; and yet Lumley found it hard to go away. He had a weary week of probation before him, and, it might be, at the end of it bitter disappointment.

At last he pulled out his watch and found it was ten o'clock.

"What an unconscionable time I have kept you up," he said, as if he had merely dropped in to talk about the weather. "Good night, Mrs. Calvert. I expect an old schoolfellow to-morrow to stay with me for a day or two; may I bring him to see you? I think you will like him."

Cecilia gladly gave permission. She knew that Lumley would not keep away from her cottage during the week, and the presence of his friend would prevent all the awkwardness of a *tête-à-tête*.

The afternoon of the day but one following she was on her way back to her cottage from the little town, when she saw the young rector coming towards her, and beside him a gentleman, a stranger in Combhurst; but he was not a stranger to her, and she wondered what strange perversity and caprice of fate

brought Edward Saville to be the guest of Frank Lumley just at that time.

She had not made up her mind to marry the young clergyman, without giving him at least a sketch of her history; but it would be hard to have the secrets of her life laid bare before him by Saville's unsparing tongue.

"If I may not accept his love, it would have been something to keep his respect." So she thought as she nerved herself for the inevitable meeting.

She did not expect Saville to make a scene and to expose her there and then; but she had a vision before her of what would take place when the two men were alone again.

She was to all outward appearance perfectly self-possessed as Lumley introduced "my great friend, Edward Saville;" but she felt that she had grown paler, and she knew that she was trembling, as she had

often done when in fear of her husband's violence, but she looked up bravely into Lumley's face as she said—

“You did not mention your friend's name when you told me he was coming; I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Saville at my sister's wedding some years ago.”

She went back to their introduction; all that had taken place since that time she entirely ignored.

Saville was so surprised to see her, he could scarcely speak, and when she asked him, with the utmost coolness, if he had written a new play lately, he answered quite at random. Was it Mrs. Westbrook, then—the woman who had done him such a deadly wrong—about whom his friend Lumley had been discoursing in such raptures the evening before, and during their walk that afternoon? Was it true that he was wildly in love with her and hoped to make her his wife?

Of course he did not know anything about her, as she was living in Combhurst under a false name. Saville, with the rest of the world, had heard the tale of Prince Petöfi's death and the cause assigned for the fatal duel, and he did not for a moment doubt that, already deserted by her Austrian lover, Cecilia had taken refuge in this quiet English town. He could believe anything of the woman who had separated him from Leda Fortescue.

He had shaken hands with her because he could not refuse without actual rudeness when she held out her hand to him ; but he scarcely spoke at all, and as he stood a little apart listening to her slightly disjointed talk with Lumley, he tried to decide all in a moment whether it was his duty to enlighten his friend.

Lumley was well inclined to turn about and escort Mrs. Calvert back to her cottage, but she would not allow him.

"You are going for a walk," she said, addressing herself pointedly to Saville. Then she turned to Lumley, "I am glad to hear you are going to dine out to-night, as I have a bad headache, and I could not ask you and your friend to spend the evening with me ; but another time, I hope, if he stays——" she bowed to each of the young men, and she had walked on before Lumley could tell her how grieved he was to hear that she was suffering.

"Well, what do you think of her ?" he asked, excitedly, of Saville. "Is she not beautiful? Do you wonder now at my delight that she has not absolutely refused me?"

"You know that she is rich, I suppose?" was Saville's evasive answer.

"I have never given the matter a thought," replied Lumley, rather impatiently; he was disappointed that Saville had not broken out into raptures equal to his

own. "I have fair private means of my own, and my living is a very good one. We shall do very well, please God, if we marry."

"I should think you would," returned Saville, with a laugh of amusement. "Your beautiful widow has to my certain knowledge upwards of thirty thousand a year."

"Thirty thousand!" repeated Lumley. "My dear fellow, impossible! You must be mistaken! I do not believe it. Why should she come here?"

"Why, indeed?" said Saville. "I believe that only from her own lips can you hear the reason, and the question is, will she give it if you ask her."

"You surprise me very much," poor Lumley began. "I am very sorry, I almost wish you had not told me; but I am sure, quite sure, that she has some good reason for what she does. What do you think?"

“ I think if you are a wise man, Lumley, you will go away to-morrow morning and never see her again ; a marriage with her will not bring you happiness.”

“ Why do you say so ? What do you know of her ?” cried Lumley, impetuously and rather angrily. They were by that time on a lonely country road, and the young clergyman stopped and faced his companion. “ No doubt,” he continued, still speaking excitedly, “ that envious world, of which she must have been one of the brightest ornaments, has shot its poisoned arrows at her. She is young, beautiful, and, you say, rich, that is enough——”

“ My dear fellow,” Saville interrupted, “ you are talking rank nonsense ; the world has not shot any poisoned arrows, as you call them, at Mrs.—Calvert ; the world has been only too kind to her ; but remember I have warned you, do not marry her.”

“Saville, you have said too much and too little. Is there any history attached to Mrs. Calvert which I ought to hear, and which you know? I do not want hearsay, I want facts, if there are any, and you have no right to keep them from me, and yet——” he stopped, and the expression of his face suddenly changed.

“I understand,” said Saville, interpreting the look aright, “you think it would be wronging her to hear her story unless from her own lips. I am glad you think so, for I could not tell you what I know of her. You say she has asked you to reflect for a week whether you are wise to persist in your wish to marry a woman who does not care for you. If I knew that you had determined upon breaking away from this mad infatuation altogether, it would take a load off my mind.”

“What curious creatures we are,” said Lumley, reflectively. “You call my love

for the most beautiful and fascinating woman I have ever seen, infatuation, because you have heard some story that has prejudiced you against her. If you had never seen or heard of her until you came to Combhurst, you would say I was the luckiest fellow in the world to have the chance of winning such a wife."

"I suppose you are right," Saville answered. He was thinking of his last interview with Mrs. Westbrook, and of how she had flung her arms about his neck to bid him farewell. The bitterness in his heart against her had never died out, and he despised her so thoroughly that, forgetting that his friend saw her only as she now appeared, he could not understand the glamour she had thrown over him. "I suppose you are right, Lumley," he repeated again, after a pause, "and that every word we speak is unconsciously influenced by some secret feeling; but I cannot reason

it out with you now. I am bewildered ; and I suppose you must be left to your own judgment in the matter, after all."

"If she accepts me she will tell me the truth ; and I am sure she has not done anything too bad for me to forgive," Lumley answered, confidently.

And so the subject was dropped by mutual consent. The walk begun so happily had a gloomy ending. The reserve inevitable from the nature of the conversation which had just taken place about Mrs. Calvert, seized upon both the friends, and Saville could not help feeling relieved when Lumley left him to keep his dinner engagement.

CHAPTER XIV.

HAVING eaten his dinner alone, Saville tried to interest himself in a book, but he was too restless and disturbed in mind to read with any enjoyment. If those scandals relating to the Princess Petöfi were true, it would not be right to allow his friend to marry her in ignorance. He might keep from him the story of how she had ruined his happiness by separating him from Leda Fortescue, it was possible that she might have bitterly repented of that baseness, but he could not help feeling that her conduct of late, since her second marriage, had not been above suspicion, when

he found her living under a false name at Combhurst. If she thought fit to drop the title of Princess in England, why did she not call herself Madame Petöfi ?

He had put aside his book, and gone out of doors, and for some time he had been pacing up and down a walk in the rectory grounds, which ran along the boundary between them and Mrs. Calvert's garden. There was a little gate at one end of the walk, through which the young clergyman was wont to make a short cut when he went to see the woman he loved.

When Saville reached the gate, after his third or fourth turn, he noticed that there was a woman standing near it, and he guessed at once that she was Mrs. Westbrook. He always thought of her by that name.

"Mr. Saville," she said, when she saw that she was observed, "I have been watching you from my window, and I came

out expressly to speak to you. Will you be kind enough to come in with me for a few moments?"

He did not speak, but he came through the wicket, and when she saw that he was about to do so, she turned towards the house, and he followed.

Not a word was spoken until they were in the little drawing-room, and it was an awkward moment for both when they stood face to face alone, and remembered how they had parted some years before. She did not ask him to sit down, and she remained standing herself, with her hand resting on the back of a chair. It was dusk outside, but there were lights in the room, and he could see how changed she was, but he saw also that she was still very beautiful.

"What a small place the world is, after all!" she began, rather nervously. "I did not expect to see you in this out-of-the-

way place, and I am sure you did not expect to see me."

"I did not even know that you were in England," he said, "and, of course, it did not occur to me that Mrs. Calvert and Madame Petöfi were the same."

"But you knew of the death of my husband, and—and how he died? They published shameful falsehoods about us. The duel in which he lost his life was fought in a very different cause from that published in the English papers."

"I am glad to hear it, for your sake," Saville answered gravely.

"God knows I have been bad enough without the addition of that calumny," she cried, in a tone implying that she considered it would be better to suffer from a true report than from a false one. "Tell me," she added quickly, "have you told Mr. Lumley who I am, and that you and I were—were friends once?"

"He has not heard anything from me," Saville replied; "but I have heard from him that he loves you, and wishes to make you his wife. I have no desire to hurt or wound you, Mrs. Westbrook—pardon me for using the only name I am familiar with—but I cannot say with truth that I have forgotten or forgiven the wrong you did me in days gone by; but if you think you can make Frank happy, and if in your heart of hearts you do not know of any episode in your life, except that unfortunate one in which I am mixed up, which unfits you to be the wife of such a man as he is, far be it from me to come between you and him. Why should I cast the first stone at you?"

"Thank you." That was all she said in answer; she felt such a choking sensation in her throat that to speak was a painful effort, and to see Saville standing there before her, and to hear him say calmly

that he had no wish to hurt her, was also a trouble to her. He was putting her, as it were, on her honour not to deceive his friend, and yet his evident desire to spare her as much as possible irritated, while it touched her.

“My life has been very miserable since my marriage,” she began presently, hoping to touch him by a half appeal to his feelings. “I have had a great deal to bear, and since my return to England my friends, being prejudiced by false reports, have turned their backs upon me. I came down here to escape from all this misery, and if I do not marry Mr. Lumley, I must go away again.”

“Be honest, then, and truthful, Mrs. Westbrook—tell him who you are, and why you are here. He is in total ignorance of the position you held in society here and abroad; he would not believe me when I told him how rich you were. Do

not marry him under any false pretence—I entreat of you to tell him the whole truth.”

“The whole truth involves a great deal. Am I to tell him that you and I were once on the eve of marriage?”

“I do not think it is absolutely necessary for you to tell him that, but do as you please. I have said before that I have no wish to cause you unnecessary pain.”

She smiled half derisively, half mournfully, as she said,

“I believe the pain I have suffered in my life would far outweigh the pleasures I have enjoyed. I seem to have made one long series of mistakes, and the one by which I lost your—your friendship and respect was the greatest of all.”

“Then if that has indeed been the most serious error of your life, Mrs. Westbrook, let us bury it in silence for evermore, and if you think you can like Lumley well

enough to be his wife, marry him, and make him happy."

Saville spoke very kindly and earnestly, and his eyes were fixed upon her troubled face, as if he were trying to read her thoughts. She blushed painfully under his fixed gaze.

"It was not the only one," she answered, in an unsteady voice. "I had fallen lower before, and—since."

"Then spare him, I implore of you. I have no right to judge you harshly, for I do not know what your temptations may have been. I can only wonder at the perversity with which you seem to have gone out of your way to lose the respect of those who paid such willing homage to your beauty."

Tears were running quietly down her face as she listened to him. His was but worldly wisdom, after all, but it had an effect upon her that no words of holier im-

port could have had. Religion with her had never been more than a name. She had gone to church, because it was the right thing to do, on Sunday, and because the music at the fashionable chapel she attended was so beautiful; but the idea of regulating her life or conduct by the teaching of the Bible never occurred to her. She had a vague, general idea that the book was a good one for old and sick people to read, for her part she found more pleasure in a fast and exciting novel.

When Saville made the appeal to her to spare his friend, she would have given half her income to be able to live her life over again *from the time of her first widowhood*. She had no wish to undo the act by which she had gained possession of the Westbrook property, and it was only her impotence to change a part of the past that grieved her now, and made her cry.

But the interview had been infinitely

more painful to Saville than to her. He had had to try so hard to be just and generous, and to keep all his angry feelings towards the woman who had so selfishly murdered his happiness well in the background. He had succeeded tolerably so far, and he felt rather pleased to think that he had been able to work upon her feelings so much. He believed that she would now refuse to marry Lumley, or that she would tell him her history, and give him the option of withdrawing his offer.

It seemed to both of them that they had been for a long time silent, but in reality the pause had lasted but a few minutes only, when Saville spoke again.

"I do not think there is anything more to be said between us now, Mrs. Westbrook, and if anything has given you pain in this interview, remember that it was your own seeking."

"I remember," she answered. "Will

you not trust me now to do the right thing as regards your friend?"

"The kindest thing would be to leave Combhurst without seeing him again," said Saville, as he took up his hat. "It will grieve him terribly even to hear that you are living under a false name."

"I must be the best judge of what is kind in the matter," she rejoined, quickly, on fire at once to resent dictation. "Good night."

It was an awkward moment for both. He did not know whether to hold out his hand or not. But she drew back a little instead of coming forward, and she merely bowed as he went past her to go out, as he had come in, by the window.

Then she followed him as far as the little grass plot outside, and stood looking after him until he was out of sight, thinking of how she had loved him once. How far away all that time seemed now! And

yet only a few years had passed since she had been making preparations for her marriage with him ; and now it had not made her heart beat one throb the quicker to stand there so close to him, and to see him looking almost as handsome, if less bright and happy, as of old.

“ I do not think I can have any heart,” she said, as she at last re-entered the house. “ I believe I should have grown tired even of him.”

CHAPTER XV.

ON the plea of indisposition, Mrs. Calvert contrived to avoid a meeting with Lumley during the week of probation, as he had called it. She knew that Saville had left the rectory, and she made all her preparations for leaving Combhurst herself as soon as possible after her interview with her lover.

Watching, as usual, from her window on the evening of the day she expected him, she saw him leave the rectory and come into her grounds by the wicket-gate. He walked very quickly—so quickly that, when he entered by the window, he was out of breath.

"Have I come too early?" he said, as he noticed that her lamps had not yet been lighted for the evening. "Forgive my impatience, but the week of my banishment has seemed a year long at least."

She could tell by his voice and eyes the nature of his decision.

"It has been long," she answered. "The days grow so short. I suppose that is the reason."

"No," he said; "but because the subject upon which I had to reflect for a week at your desire was easily settled, and I wanted to come and tell you so. Cecilia, the very fact of having to decide in my own mind to give you up because you do not love me, showed me how impossible it is. As I told you before, so I tell you again—I am willing to run the risk, if you will but believe in my longing desire to call you mine—to make you happy."

"I do believe it," she answered, earnest-

ly. "I believe that no one has ever loved me unselfishly, as you do. And if, when you have heard all I have to tell you about myself, you still wish to make me your wife, I——"

His arm was round her before she had finished.

"Do not tell me anything," he said. "My own darling, if you have suffered let me make up to you for all."

He tried to draw her close to him, but she resisted resolutely.

"I cannot let you marry me under any delusions," she said. "Although I do not love you, I have no right to deceive you. But let me ask first, did not Mr. Saville tell you anything about me?"

"He told me you were rich, and I do not think I believed him."

"Did he tell you that my name was not Calvert, and that I had at one time been engaged to him?"

"To him? You cannot be serious, Cecilia?" Lumley withdrew his arm quickly from about her. "Engaged to Saville? I—I understood, he told me himself that at one time he was engaged to an actress, and that she ran away from him. Have you been on the stage?"

"I believe I have been acting all my life, but I have not been on the stage," she answered, with a laugh. "No, the actress to whom he was engaged is dead, and Edward Saville lays her death at my door. Do not look so horrified; I did not stab her or poison her, but I gave her to understand that there had been an old love affair between me and the man she was engaged to marry. She believed me, like a little fool as she was, and with a wild and high-flown idea in her mind that she was standing between him and happiness, she left him, and I hinted to him that

she had deserted him for a new lover. Have I told you enough, or shall I go on?"

He had abruptly left her side, and he was now sitting a little apart, and his face was turned towards the window. He did not look round as he said "Go on."

"After a short time he and I were engaged. We had kept up a correspondence for some time, and I did not try to hide that I loved him, for I was determined to be his wife. However, the fates willed otherwise, I suppose, for the girl whom he loved met with an accident on the stage, and sent for him. On her death-bed she told him what I had done, and our marriage was broken off. Now do you love me as you did quarter of an hour ago?"

He started violently when he heard the question. She was standing before him,

looking down at him; her face was glowing, and her eyes were bright with excitement.

He seized both her hands, and pressed them passionately to his lips.

"I am grieved to know that you are less perfect than I fancied," he said, "but I cannot give you up."

She pulled her hands away from him, but remained standing before him.

"Do not move," she said, when he would have risen, "you have more to hear. In less than three months after my engagement with Edward Saville was broken off, I was married in London with great pomp and ceremony to an Hungarian nobleman, Prince Michael Petöfi. I did not love him, and I believe he married me only for my money, for he made me miserable; and when, towards the close of last year, he was killed in a duel, I came back to England——"

"And the cause of the duel?" interrupted Lumley, upon whose memory a vague remembrance of something he had heard, or read, was struggling. "Was it—oh! Cecilia, was it jealousy of you, his wife?"

"No," she answered—"he insulted and struck me before his guests, and the man whom my friends in England were good enough to call my lover, and whom I just knew by sight, challenged him; but my good name is helplessly ruined, I have been cut dead by everyone, and if you marry me you marry a woman damaged in reputation, and, I believe, without a friend in the world."

"But, my poor darling"—he spoke so gently and tenderly—"when you are conscious of your own innocence, of what value is the opinion of the cruel suspicious world? I believe in you, and again I ask

you to let my love make up to you for all that you have suffered. You have not been faultless, but if you had not sincerely repented of what——”

To his surprise, she interrupted him by falling upon her knees at his feet, and crying out almost wildly,

“No, no, do not deceive yourself. I am sorry only because I have failed so often, and you shall never marry a woman such as I know myself to be. It will be kinder to banish all your illusions at once, so now listen and be convinced. When I was eighteen, I contrived to throw the blame of an action of which I was myself guilty upon my cousin, Edgar Westbrook, the only child of a very rich aunt and uncle, by whom I had been adopted. By means of that deception I inherited the very large fortune which was his by right. He was desperately in love with me, I disliked and

despised him for being weak and easily led ; but when he found out, by accident, how I had plotted to turn his parents against him, I persuaded him that I had done it all to test the reality of his affection, and I married him to ensure his belief in me. For five years he lived with me, a miserable and broken-hearted man, for as soon as marriage had sealed his lips—he would have died rather than betray his wife—I took no further pains to hide my real feelings regarding him. When I was left a widow, I went into the world as the rich Mrs. Westbrook. I was only three and twenty. I had upwards of thirty thousand a year, and my career, until I became Madame Petöfi, was brilliant beyond measure. I could do what I pleased, and, like a reckless fool, I threw every chance away, but, with the malignity of fate, punishment has fallen upon me at last for what I have not done."

Lumley sat looking down at her as she knelt before him, and he listened, spell-bound, while she wildly and hurriedly told him a tale which seemed to him as if it could not be true—of her. When she stopped, he drew a long breath, but he did not speak—he felt too utterly cast down and miserable. If she had indeed told him the truth, she was not a fit wife for him.

“Have you not told me all this to test *my* affection?” he said at last, as he bent forward and touched her shoulder lightly. “It may be true of some other woman, perhaps, but it cannot be true of you.”

“It is true of me,” she answered vehemently; “and even yet I have not told you all—I have kept the worst part of my confession for the last, but——”

“Hush! for God’s sake!” he inter-

rupted. "I cannot hear any more—my brain is bewildered! I seem almost to have lost all clue to your identity—I hardly know by what name to call you now."

"But one thing at least is clear, you will never call me wife," she said. "I have been very cruel to you, Frank. I ought simply to have refused you, and to have gone away, but I believe it will help you to forget me the quicker, now that you know I am utterly unworthy of your love; that is, unless your love is strong enough to blot out all my faults, unless you can take me as I am."

"God forbid!" he answered quickly. "You would have added one more to your—your many shortcomings, had you allowed me to marry you in ignorance, but I could not find an excuse for myself if I were to make you my wife now, and yet God knows how I have loved you!"

"And if I had loved you," she answered bitterly, "I would have made it so hard for you to give me up that you would have married me, in spite of everything. Yes, and who can tell, your love might have been my salvation!"

He rose and prepared to leave. His face was very pale, and he tried to avoid looking at her, as he said, fervently,

"Then I can but thank God with all my heart that you have not loved me, for the struggle to go away, and never to see you again, seems to tear my heart in two; what would it be, then, if I heard one loving word from your lips? I little knew what was before me when I came here to-night, full of joy and hope! Oh! Cecilia, of all the cruel things you have ever done, the most cruel was to delude me as you have done up to this time."

"Do not reproach me," she said. "Re-

member that to make my confession must have cost me something, and if I ever had any feeling for others, the miserable life I have led since my second marriage has taken it all out of me. I am sorry for you, but I am infinitely more sorry for myself."

He heard the last words as he went out through the window. Self! Yes, that was the pivot upon which her whole life had turned, and now she was paying the bitter penalty.

For many and many a day the experience of that summer weighed upon Lumley's life. It was so hard to root up the love that had taken hold of him for the beautiful and fascinating woman who was, by her own confession, so unfit to be his wife, and yet there were moments when he wished he had followed the dictates of passion only, and taken her to brighten his lonely home.

He even tormented himself with the thought that he might have been the means of throwing her back amongst the temptations which she had already found too strong for her. But by degrees these doubts subsided. She had not given any evidence of a change of heart. She was simply reckless and bitter, because the world she loved had been hard upon her. Married to her, his life would have been one long conflict between the desire to trust fully, and the suspicion which would inevitably creep into everything in which she took part. She had plotted successfully to deceive others. Could he feel certain that she would never plot to deceive him? And there would not even have been the safeguard for her of love for her husband.

So the years went on, and other summers came and went in quiet Combhurst, and the beautiful image of Cecilia faded

slowly but surely from Lumley's heart; but he never married. She was his first and last love.

CHAPTER XVI.

CECILIA left Combhurst the next day, and went back to London. She had made up her mind to winter in Italy; but before she left England she determined to look into her affairs, and to put in her claim for a share of the property left by the Prince. How strange it was that she had never heard from Herr Joseph, how ungrateful he had proved after all! She felt sure that he would have written to her all the particulars of her husband's last hours.

She consulted her lawyer and her bankers, and found out from the latter

how the Prince had got possession of the bonds upon which the interest of her foreign securities was paid. It took some time to make her understand that by the sale of those bonds, unless the money had been re-invested by the Prince, her income had been reduced by about ten thousand a year. It was just possible, however, that he might have placed the bonds with his own banker in Vienna, and that his nephew and successor, another Prince Michael, was enjoying the income derived from them.

After some deliberation it was agreed that the lawyer should write to the Vienna bankers and make inquiries. He did so, and some weeks passed before a reply came. There was no direct answer given to the question asked ; but the letter said that if Madame Petöfi would make it her business to come to Vienna everything might be arranged to her satisfaction.

With her usual impetuosity Cecilia at once resolved to go ; she had been very remiss, she thought, not to have done so long since. Who could tell? Perhaps she might even recover the lace and jewels that had been taken from her. The young man who had succeeded her husband in the title and much encumbered estates of Petöfi, was an amiable and studious young fellow, with whom she felt sure it would be easy for her to deal.

Vienna was not exactly on her way to Italy, to be sure ; but that was a matter of no consequence, her time was her own, and the more she had to distract her thoughts the better. She was trying very hard to forget all that happened at Combhurst. She had told Lumley the truth when she had said she was more sorry for herself than for him. She blamed herself for having been so honest and outspoken to him, or, rather, she was mortified to find

that, in spite of his ardent professions of love, her power over him had been so slight. That any man could allow principle to stand between him and the possession of a coveted object was to her incomprehensible.

She was now as anxious to get away from England as she had been to reach it a few months before. By-and-by, perhaps, she might come back, when all the slanders which had been spread about her at the time of the Prince's death were forgotten. She had made a mistake in so soon braving public opinion. She must be less reckless. Society might be led; but it would not submit to be driven.

But as, in her ignorance of what might be, she made plans for the coming years, the end of all was very near. Socially her life had been a failure; but her splendid health had never known a flaw, except in the signal instance of her illness at Vienna,

and the dread idea of death she kept ever far out of sight.

But death waits not for permission to attack his victims, and in Paris Mrs. Westbrook died. She caught a chill, low fever set in, and in a week she was gone. Until the last moment she obstinately put from her the idea of danger, and so she died alone amongst strangers. A sad and mournful ending for one so young, so beautiful, and so reckless. Not once had she done good to anyone, and she had done harm to many besides herself. Heartless and selfish she had been from first to last, and her miserable death was a fitting commentary upon her life.

She had put off from time to time, as has been already told, any second disposition of her property, and as her husband predeceased her, the will by which everything was left to him was, even if it had not been destroyed, so much waste-paper ;

and so it came to pass that her splendid fortune (for, in spite of the extravagance of the Prince, she left behind her a noble inheritance) went to the next of kin of Edgar Westbrook. By the will of Edgar's mother, the property, if Cecilia died intestate and without children, was to revert to the family of her first husband. This kinsman, of whom Cecilia had never even heard, was a poor clerk in a lawyer's office in London, a married man with a large family, and his sudden accession to wealth so dazed and oppressed him that it is doubtful whether he had ever any real enjoyment from it.

But that the fortune of which Cecilia Calvert had so dishonestly possessed herself should return to one of the Westbrooks was surely only just and right; and yet it is a problem for those who are interested in ethical questions to solve whether, if Cecilia had repented of her

first sin, and lived a decent and moral life, making good use of her ill-gotten wealth, there might not have been more happiness accruing from it to a greater number of deserving objects than ever fell to the lot of man, woman, or child from the hour it passed into the possession of the lawyer's clerk.

And so ends the history of Mrs. Westbrook. The writer is conscious that it is throughout a tale with less of brilliancy than gloom, but one, it is hoped, not wholly without moral for those—and they are few—who look for moral in a story which is, it may be added, not all fiction.

EPILOGUE.

IT may, perhaps, interest some readers of this story to hear that in due time young Dundas came back and claimed Nina as his wife. Long before he appeared, however, people had begun to see that if the scandal relating to her and Lord Forrester had been true the result would scarcely have been a reconciliation between him and his wife. Captain Percival is now Lord Castlemeadows ; his father and uncle had died of old age, his cousins had both gone rather unexpectedly, one had died of fever, the other had been killed out hunting, and as neither of them

had left children, he succeeded to the earldom, and his handsome American wife makes a very charming mistress for the old historic castle in ——shire. She is one of the most popular women in London, and she and her husband are always quoted as a model couple. She does not know, and there is not anyone quite heartless enough to tell her, that up to the time of his marriage her husband had been one of the fastest men about town. It is but just to him, however, to own that he makes a fairly good husband.

And selfish as he was, Cecilia was not so utterly forgotten by him as she had been by all her fashionable friends. He and his wife often stayed at Cayve Court, and he could not go into the library there without thinking of the afternoon he had asked Mrs. Westbrook to be his wife. As things had turned out, what a mistake she had made to refuse him; had she not done

so, the rank she had so openly coveted would have been hers after all.

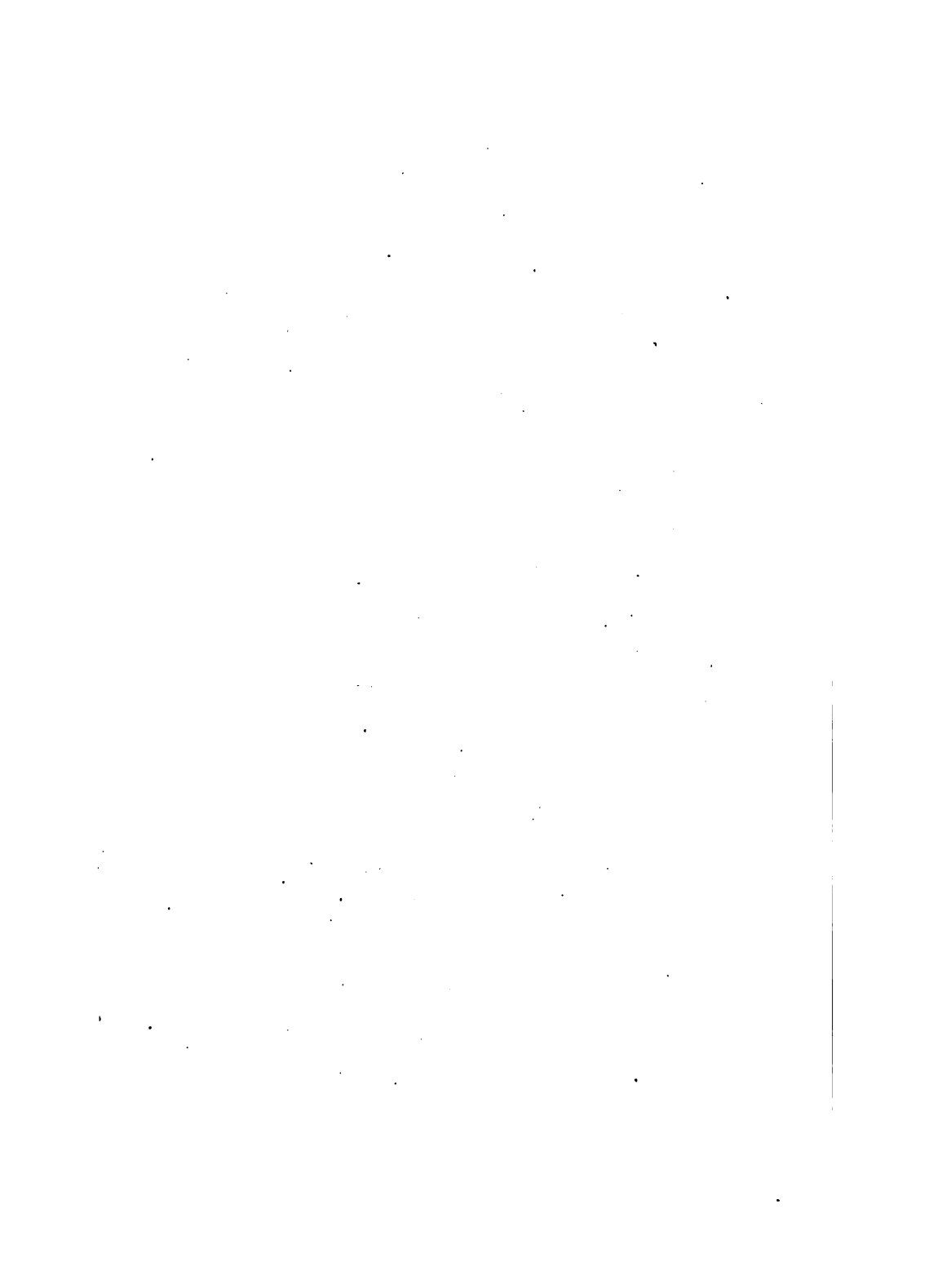
But, for his part, he is very well satisfied with the wife he has chosen ; and as the years go by, the remembrance of Cecilia goes with them.

Edward Saville remained true to the memory of the "maiden with the soft eyes full of fancies." He is very often a guest at Beauwood Chase ; but Helen has never asked him why his marriage with her sister was broken off. She suspects that the tale would be a sad one to hear and to tell, and that his happiness was wrecked, as her own had all but been, by the beautiful and unscrupulous Mrs. Westbrook.

THE END.

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